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Last and First Idol

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Last and First Idol

Prologue

This novel tells the story of a girl who becomes the greatest idol of all. The protagonist, Mika Furutsuki, is an entirely fictional character. And yet, every word written here is true. The Idol whose origin was Mika Furutsuki will have a dramatic effect on the universe and your very existence.

You must read this novel with utmost care and attention. You must cheer for Mika Furutsuki, you must empathize with her, and you must identify with her. When you have finished reading this novel, assuming you understood it, you will have found yourself accepting a new calling.

These words — this book — are written for no one else. Only you.

Mika Furutsuki loved idols. In this time period referred to as the Great Idol Wars, such a thing was not uncommon. Idols would spring up like bamboo shoots after the rain, and the number of their fans would grow accordingly without bound. But Mika Furutsuki went a step beyond those filthy casuals. After all, she became an idol otaku when she was six months old. At the time, she was a baby that would constantly cry at night. Be it night or day, her voice would ring out 24/7 and deny her parents sleep and peace of mind. Worried, they searched for something the child could latch onto, something that would bring her calm. They tried dolls, castanets, video games, toy models, tops, kites, robots, aprons, flashlights, cardboard mazes, and even hamsters, but Mika Furutsuki showed interest in none of them.

One night her exhausted parents were channel surfing, and the CRT screen flipped from the President to a businessman to a chef, a doctor, a dog, a brass band, a car, and then, finally, an idol. The moment the idol appeared, Mika Furutsuki stopped crying. Her eyes opened wide, staring at the face of the idol dancing on the TV screen. Her facial muscles were stimulated, forming a smile. A carefree, cherubic smile. That same, innocent smile that was the very archetype of a baby's smile.

That's it! her parents thought. This was their ticket to a good night's sleep.

The Furutsuki family was not exactly rich. But Mika Furutsuki was flooded with a torrent of idol goods. Video tapes were replayed so often the magnetic film would wear off and they'd stop working. A year after Mika Furutsuki's birth, her sister Miya Furutsuki was born, and they enjoyed idols together. As the two of them grew, DVDs replaced video tapes. By elementary school, they began attending idol concerts. Mika Furutsuki was a naturally shy and somewhat emotionally unstable child, but her love of idols thankfully helped her to make many friends. It would not be an exaggeration to say that idols were her salvation.

But at the same time, idols caused Mika Furutsuki's life to bend out of shape. The constant concert trips and DVD purchases cost a fortune, putting the squeeze on the family budget; they ate poorly and her parents were forced to work extra hours. Tensions increased within the home until, finally, her parents divorced. Miya Furutsuki went with her father, splitting apart from Mika Furutsuki who went with her mother. This happened when Mika Furutsuki was thirteen, a first-year student in middle school. This was such a blow to her that she refused to go to school for an entire year, spending that time watching idol concert videos in a blacked-out room, over and over and over again. She ate only two meals a day — on bad days, only one. Her skin grew unhealthily pale, her body thin. Though her mother worried, Mika Furutsuki was secretly pleased. She thought she looked almost like a real idol.

After a year like this, Mika Furutsuki grew more stable. She'd found herself a new purpose — Hikarigayama National High School. A school for girls, it had not been a very popular place until just a year before, when they'd walked off with top place in a new amateur idol contest, drawing the attention of idol fans nationwide.

Naturally, Mika Furutsuki had been at the concert, and it blew her away. Each idol had their own unique personality, and each one was brilliant in their own right, yet their performance as a group was in perfect harmony. Getting individuals this different from one another to come together as a single group was in and of itself a work of art. It was as if a soccer player, a hunter, a street vendor, a car racer, a cult leader, a pottery maker, an engineer, a salesman, and an air traffic controller had joined forces to save the world, each using their particular skill sets. Mika Furutsuki's mind was made up. She *had* to join that group. She was all raring to go after cutting herself off from the world for so long. And she was absolutely, positively certain that she had to become an idol, no matter what.

Mika Furutsuki studied her ass off. After a year's absence, she was behind her classmates, but soon overcame that late start and passed the entrance exam with flying colors.

High school became the best time of her life. The school had become famous because of idols, so naturally there were tons of like-minded idol fans around

her. The upperclassmen in the idol club seemed somewhat nonplussed by the sudden influx of new members, but after some trial and error, they arrived at a system in which they broke into multiple, smaller groups. Mika Furutsuki was assigned to a five-girl group named P-VALUE, and there she met someone that changed her destiny. Not only *her* destiny, but the destiny of the *entire universe*.

“Hi, I’m Maori Niizono.”

On the day P-VALUE was formed, Mika Furutsuki received a perfectly ordinary greeting. Maori Niizono was tall, with short hair, a stern look to her eyes, and definitely not the sort of person who made friends easily. In fact, she remained somewhat apart from the other members of the group.

Mika Furutsuki spent her high school days trying to be liked by everyone. She was naturally timid and introverted, and that was exactly why she worked so hard at acting cheerful and outgoing. It may have been an act, even a sham, but it did its job hiding her actual shyness. She was good at using her phony cheer to make friends, but she ended up with no friends who actually understood her. She was too afraid that revealing her true self would lead to her friends distancing themselves from her. She was convinced that if that happened she’d become unstable and drive them further away — a vicious circle. The only way she could keep it together was to continue pretending to be cheerful.

Maori Niizono was Mika Furutsuki’s polar opposite. She maintained a veneer of indifference, immediately spoke up if something annoyed her, and was prone to sighs of boredom. Rumor had it her parents were doctors and ran a hospital, so she was quite well off. This certainly got her a lot of attention in class, but not many friends.

Mika Furutsuki put a tremendous amount of effort into meeting expectations, especially for idol activities. She would blow off classes to learn songs, practice choreography, and train her core skills. Meanwhile Maori Niizono showed no signs of caring about anyone else’s expectations, while easily handling any subject put to her. Apparently, she’d studied piano, singing, and ballet as a child. Mika Furutsuki would mess up routines she’d practiced for hours and hours while Maori Niizono effortlessly learned new ones.

The distance between the two showed no sign of getting any smaller. After all, no matter how you did the math, the two simply had no common factors. Mika Furutsuki tried to put Maori Niizono out of her mind. She was afraid if she tried too hard to become friends, she'd end up opening a rift between them instead. Whether she picked up on this or not, Maori Niizono did nothing to make them closer.

What finally made them best friends was a complete coincidence. About a month after school started, Mika Furutsuki was, like always, up early for morning practice. She was on the rooftop that the idol club used before anyone else, practicing her dance moves in silence. It took her longer than the other members to learn the choreography, so she always made time for solo practice.

"That step's a half-beat off-tempo," said a voice behind her.

She turned around to find Maori Niizono standing there. "What brings you here this early?"

"Looks like my alarm clock broke. It rang early. Didn't see the point in going back to sleep, so I figured I'd enjoy the morning air. You always here this early?"

Maori Niizono's question made her uncomfortable. She felt embarrassed to be practicing this early every morning with no significant results.

"...yeah." She nodded.

"Hmm. Want some help?"

"Wha...?" The offer took her by surprise.

"We're all in the same group. Might be a good opportunity to get to know each other."

"You're sure it's not too much to ask, Niizono-san?"

"Of course not. Idol activities are just for fun, after all."

Being an idol was her life's goal, yet her skill lagged far behind someone just doing it for fun. This fact came as such a blow it must have shown on her face, as Maori Niizono became concerned.

"You feeling OK there?"

“...yes. I’m fine.” But Mika Furutsuki couldn’t stop her tears.

“Did... I say something wrong? Then I’m sorry...”

There was a long, awkward silence.

“...becoming an idol is my dream. But when I compare myself to you, Niizono-san... I dunno, it just kinda gets me down.” The silence had rattled her so much that she spoke the truth.

“Oh, well, in that case I’ll be your producer.”

The conversation headed in an unexpected direction.

“But... I can’t even remember the choreography...”

“You’ve got it all wrong. Nobody’s looking for flawless choreography or dancing from idols. Even if you aren’t that good, if you look like you’re working hard at it, the audience will see themselves in you, and empathize. In that sense, you’re way more suited to the idol life than I am.”

“I... am?”

Inside, she was incredibly happy to hear this.

“Yeah! First, let’s make your speech pattern and hairstyle a little more idol-esque. Let’s see here...”

And just like that, Maori Niizono became Mika Furutsuki’s producer. Her hairstyle was their first target. At Maori Niizono’s suggestion, she changed it from long and straight to twin tails, dramatically increasing the cute factor. This also helped with her pale skin, which otherwise looked a little sickly. Next, they looked at her first-person pronoun. She’d been using ‘atashi,’ but instead she started to refer to herself in the third person. Calling herself ‘Mika’ emphasized her youth, and reinforced her character. This matched up well with her short stature.

Using Mika Furutsuki’s new character as a springboard, P-VALUE’s attitude changed. With a very idol-like person at the center, the other girls began to grasp what being in an idol group actually meant. Soon, the rest of the members were joining the two of them for early morning practice, and they began entering idol contests in other districts.

The two girls had more chances to work together, and they grew closer, until everyone considered them best friends. For three glittering, golden years, Mika Furutsuki's high school life was fantastic. She could feel herself shining as an idol.

It was only afterwards that the problems started. The moment she graduated and left the idol group, she would lose her identity as an idol and return to being just a normal person. But Mika Furutsuki couldn't stand going back to how she was before. She was well beyond that. She wanted to continue shining as an idol for ever and ever.

Her mother told her to prioritize her studies, but if she had time to study, she poured that into rehearsing for auditions. She wrote 'IDOL' in big letters on the survey asking her plans for the future. Her teacher warned her that she'd come to regret this, and her mother grew convinced she'd failed her as a parent. Whenever someone tried to warn her, she just responded, "Mika will be everyone's idol! No proble-mika!" in her cutest voice.

The only one who stepped up to help her was Maori Niizono. She constantly told her, "You'll be the best idol in the universe, Mika-chan. You're cuter than anyone else I've ever met." This helped keep her confidence up. These words gave her a buzz. If Maori Niizono had not been there for her, she'd have grown dejected, and maybe even given up on being an idol. But no matter how many auditions she failed, no matter how much her mother told her to give up, all she had to do was hear Maori Niizono's words to be convinced once again of how brightly she was shining, which filled her with the desire to take the next step.

And after countless failures, she finally passed an audition. At last she caught sight of that glimmer of hope. But there was one problem. The talent office she'd be working for was in Tokyo, but Maori Niizono was going to med school in Kyoto, so they'd be forced to separate. They gave each other goodbye hugs, promised to meet again soon, and parted from one another. Mika Furutsuki swore that the next time they met, she'd be a top-selling idol.

Once she joined the office, the first thing they did was collect lesson fees. For the first six months, the monthly lesson fees would leave her racking up debt, but her manager promised that the work would start rolling in after that. Her heart dancing at the prospect of this glorious future, Mika Furutsuki took him at

his word, and threw herself into her lessons.

But what awaited Mika Furutsuki at the end of her hard work was a cruel and heartless reality.

When those six months were up, Mika Furutsuki was told the office had gone bankrupt. The office had been on a tightrope for a while, ready to fall off at any moment, so they'd gathered up a bunch of idol wannabes who'd yet to get a contract with a proper agency, milked them dry, and took off with the cash.

All that remained were the debts from the lesson fees, and her shattered psyche. She had almost nothing to show for the last six months and was unable to change offices or even go freelance. Everything she'd carefully built up had come tumbling down. All she could do was start over, going from audition to audition. And she had to work part-time to cover her living expenses all the while.

The worst part of it was the isolation. She'd come to Tokyo by herself, so she had no friends around her, or anyone to practice with. Rehearsing for auditions was no longer fun, her smile no longer natural. If she consciously tried to smile, her face just twisted out of shape. Staring at her twisted face in the mirror, she felt bitterly sad. Her stomach started to hurt. There was no way she could pass an audition like this.

She felt tempted to ask Maori Niizono for help. But she didn't act on that temptation. They'd been in touch occasionally, but she still hadn't told Maori Niizono about her office going bankrupt. She'd been too scared to say anything and put it off for so long that she ended up lying to her, saying that she was happily working as an idol. The lies piled up, and were no longer something easily taken back. The real reason she wasn't able to tell Maori Niizono the truth was because of how depressed she was. She'd been so confident when they parted, she couldn't bear to let her see her like this, struggling to even smile.

Mika Furutsuki idolized Maori Niizono. She had to become an idol that would live up to that image of her — she had to shine bright enough to live up to that ideal. And this ideal had become an obsession that caused her to indefinitely postpone revealing her reality. But then one day, suddenly, the indefinite

became finite.

“Mika-chan!”

She knew that voice. It was Maori Niizono’s voice. She turned around and saw her standing there. “Whaaaat? Maorin!” Maorin was Maori Niizono’s nickname.

“Mika-chan! I heard your talent office went bankrupt! Are you OK?”

Maori Niizono had heard about her predicament through the rumor mill. All the lies that had been piling up came tumbling down.

“Maorin... it’s all true-mika.” The shock was so great that she used her stage voice.

Mika Furutsuki took Maori Niizono to her apartment. Feeling so awkward that she forgot to say she was glad to see her again, unable to keep silent, everything came pouring out together with her tears. She began to explain everything that had happened.

“Why didn’t you tell me?!”

Maori Niizono put her arms around her sobbing friend.

“I was too embarrassed to let you see me like this...”

She let it all out. The shock of the office betraying her, her inability to trust anyone, her feelings of powerlessness and self-hatred, her worsening physical condition, her dwindling savings, her isolation in Tokyo, and the occasional feeling that she was going crazy.

“Don’t worry!” Maori Niizono said forcefully. “I’ll provide for you!”

“What?!” She didn’t know what that meant.

“I mean it! I have money. Loads of it. I can get as much as I want if I just ask my parents. I can use that to provide for you, Mika-chan! You keep right on with your idol activities.”

To Maori Niizono, this was a totally normal proposition. To her, money was not an issue. But Mika Furutsuki felt like the very idea of it was grinding her into the dirt. Perhaps this was a sociological issue; Mika Furutsuki’s family was poor, and as a product of a neoliberal society, this was tantamount to original sin.

Accepting any form of charity felt like society branding her as lazy. She unconsciously recoiled from the suggestion.

“Mm? What?” Maori Niizono said, smiling obliviously.

“I appreciate the thought, but...”

Just as she tried to refuse, the doorbell rang.

Putting the conversation on hold, Mika Furutsuki went to the door and opened it.

“Onee-sama!”

The door was yanked out of her hand, and a girl came in. The girl’s face looked exactly like hers, but she was even more petite. It was Miya Furutsuki, Mika Furutsuki’s sister, who she hadn’t seen since their parents divorced.

“Miya-chan?! What are you doing here?”

Mika Furutsuki was very confused.

“What am I doing here? I should ask you the same thing! I came to bring you back to your senses! You’re possessed by a demon! The demon called ‘idol’! Idol! Oh, what a loathsome word. Idols destroyed our family and now they’re trying to destroy you! Come, Onee-sama. It isn’t too late! Your office going under was a sign! Quit this idol nonsense and come back to the real world!”

Miya Furutsuki spoke with a passion. Convinced idols had caused her parents’ divorce, she had sworn to eradicate all idols from this world. When she’d heard her sister was trying to be an idol, she’d been unable to sit idly by.

“Mika-chan, company?” Maori Niizono had grown tired of waiting and joined them at the door.

“Hello. I’m Mika-onee-sama’s sister, Miya Furutsuki.”

“Mika-chan, you have a sister?”

“Yeah... We haven’t seen each other since our parents divorced in middle school.”

“But my heart has always been with you, Onee-sama. So, who is this other person?”

“I’m Maori Niizono. Mika-chan and I were idols together in high school.”

“Idols...?” Miya Furutsuki’s teeth ground together. “So you’re the one who destroyed Onee-sama!”

“Whaaat?!” Maori Niizono was naturally flabbergasted.

“Onee-sama was supposed to go to a decent college, get a decent job, get married, and have a good life! But, instead! Oh! She’s living alone and depressed in this awful, dirty room, her life in shambles! She’s a failure! By any measure!”

“Not by mine,” Maori Niizono replied, quietly.

“Huh? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“She is not a failure. I will provide for her.”

It took several seconds for the meaning of these words to permeate Miya Furutsuki’s head.

“Are you serious?”

“Of course I am.”

“...fuck off!” Miya Furutsuki kicked the wall so hard a flower vase fell off a shelf and shattered. “First you drive Onee-sama to ruin, and now you’re turning her into your personal plaything?! Huh?! I bet you’ll get bored and abandon her down the road! You too, Onee-sama! You’re going to just leech off this woman? How low are you willing to sink? Get a grip! Everyone’s sick of your idol bullshit! Take a look at reality for once!”

Miya Furutsuki raged like a woman possessed. Every bit the kind of angry, fight-the-power youth that people on the news were so scared of.

“Hah?! What does that even mean? Why should I have to answer to you?”

Meanwhile, Maori Niizono was not the type of person to stand there and take it. Sparks flew in the air between them. Lightning might have struck them at any moment.

Before things could come to blows, Mika Furutsuki stepped in between them.

“...get out,” she said, her voice barely a whisper. It was said quietly, but with a

fierce will.

“But, Mika-chan!”

“Onee-sama...”

Both instantly forgot to be angry and tried to calm her down.

“I said, get out!”

She shoved both of them out the door and locked it behind them. She heard them pounding on the door, but ignored it.

“Look at reality, huh?”

Mika Furutsuki smiled wanly. Her heart broke with an audible snap. Maori Niizono’s proposal had shattered her pride, and Miya Furutsuki’s declaration had forced her to recognize her own lack of talent. Combined, they revealed the reality of her current situation.

That’s right. This was reality. She would never be an idol. The harder she worked for the impossible, the deeper her wounds would become. It was time to stop. Time to end it. To end it all.

Everything that had once shone brightly within Mika Furutsuki had gone out. All the shining light that should have grown within her from idols and her idol activities was gone.

If she could not be an idol, then it was all over. She had nowhere else to go.

Mika Furutsuki carried a chair out to her tiny veranda and stepped onto it. The view before her was gorgeous. It was an ordinary city night, just narrow streets and vacant lots lit by the streetlights, but she felt the beauty of it. She’d stepped onto this veranda any number of times, but never before had the view seemed so beautiful to her.

She was glad that she could end things feeling this good.

Mika Furutsuki let out a satisfied sigh and threw herself off the veranda.

Her body fell, obeying the laws of gravitational acceleration. She fell seven stories, roughly 21 meters, so by the time she landed she was going approximately 70kph, about the same as if she’d been thrown from a car on the

highway. The shock to her body ruptured blood vessels and destroyed brain cells. For a moment she experienced the worst — and last — pain of her life, and then it was gone.

Mika Furutsuki was dead.

But her death was not the end. It was the starting line. This is where the Idol begins.

Maori Niizono and Miya Furutsuki heard the sound of Mika Furutsuki's death. Horrified, they ran out to the front road and found her lying there, covered in blood. She looked less like a human being and more like a pile of garbage that had been disposed of improperly. Maori Niizono wasn't going to med school for nothing; she lifted up the chin and checked for respiration, seeing if she was conscious. Her actions seemed calm, but her mind was a total blank. Her classes had pounded these actions into her so much she could do them without thinking. Meanwhile, Miya Furutsuki didn't even manage to call for help. She was overwhelmed with a feeling of powerlessness. There was nothing anyone without medical training could do.

An ambulance came blaring in, the sound of the siren distorted by the doppler effect. The EMTs loaded Mika Furutsuki into the back. Miya Furutsuki rode with her as her family member with Maori Niizono joining her, insisting she was also family.

Her body was taken to one of the hospitals run by Maori Niizono's parents. There was no particular reason why that hospital was chosen. Of the nearby hospitals, that was the only one ready to take a patient. But this coincidence would change the fate of the universe.

"Time of death."

The declaration came after running her through the most advanced resuscitation techniques. The doctor in charge had been convinced from the start that these efforts were futile, and they were.

When the two of them heard the news, they both went slack-jawed. They must have looked extremely stupid, but when someone you love dies unexpectedly, that's the face you make.

Mika Furutsuki's death was enough to drive both of them mad. Maori Niizono was the first to snap.

"Daddy! Please!"

She phoned her parents, who ran the hospital. They doted on her and accepted her request without a second's thought. She requested they pull the doctors from the operating room and let her in, instead.

Madness caused by the death of a close friend would drive most people in a more spiritual direction. They might claim to hear voices from the afterlife or see ghosts. But she was a scientist and only believed in the physical world she could observe. When materialists like that go mad, they place all their faith in technology. Maori Niizono was convinced that future technology would be able to revive Mika Furutsuki. She had no choice but to believe this. Anything else would plunge her into the depths of despair.

But if her body was cremated, even if there were a chance that technology could save her sometime in the future, that chance would be gone. Thousands of years would pass without the technology to rebuild a body from ash. The second law of thermodynamics stood firmly in the way. She had to preserve the body no matter what, especially the brain, for several decades. And Maori Niizono had a way to make that happen.

She prepared a razor, a scalpel, an electric drill, and an electric saw. She started with the razor.

"Sorry, Mika-chan," she muttered.

She began shaving Mika Furutsuki's hair. Her trademark twin tails fell ruthlessly to the floor. The exposed skin on her scalp was already starting to darken; oxygenation of the dead skin cells was turning the color of her beautiful pale skin to a dull brown.

Next, Maori Niizono produced a scalpel. She used that to cut through the thin layer of skin on top of the head. The circulation had long since stopped, so no blood flowed out. Her hands moved with practiced ease, like peeling a peach. The muscles covering Mika Furutsuki's head were intertwined with browned blood vessels. She ran the scalpel from the forehead to the back of the head, slicing through the muscle, then grabbed it with forceps, pulling it open to the

side. From within the darkened, bloody muscle fibers, the white bone of her skull emerged. It was as pale as her skin had been when she was alive. Maori Niizono peeled away the flesh all the way to the temples. The ears were in the way, so she sliced them off.

Now the real work began. The skull was divided into a number of parts, and normal brain surgery would only cut along the boundaries of those parts. However, this time she needed to remove them all. Maori Niizono took the electric drill, opening holes in the membranous parts of the skull. The first was just above the forehead, where you head a soccer ball. Then she opened up holes in both temples and above the nape of the neck. Finally, she used the electric saw to cut a line connecting all four holes.

Gagagagagaga, gigigigigigigi. Maori Niizono had read literature on how to perform neurosurgery, so she knew what to do. But theoretical knowledge was different from actually doing it. The vibrations from the saw as it cut were extremely strong. Just holding it made sweat run down her brow, but she endured, holding the saw steady. Beneath this bone was the core of Mika Furutsuki, the precious mass of nerves that was her brain. It was the proof that she was herself, and the root of all her thoughts, feelings, and actions. Maori Niizono could not mess this up. As she was already completely insane, the fact that Mika Furutsuki was dead made no difference to her.

The cut around the skull progressed, exposing the pale pink brain inside.

“Mika-chan, Mika-chan!” Maori Niizono muttered, cutting further. “This is where you did your thinking? This is where you looked at me? This is where you were? Heh heh heh, how funny. Mika-chan, you never got to see your own brain. I’m the first!”

At last the cut went completely around the top of the skull. Half of Mika Furutsuki’s head was gone, the brain completely exposed. This had involved severing the facial muscles, which left her mouth hanging open. It was a slovenly expression she would never have made when she was alive. Maori Niizono was upset that her actions had caused such an expression, and she offered up a silent apology.

From this point on, it was easy. She just had to place Mika Furutsuki’s brain in

a container of liquid nitrogen, preserving it, then wait for the technology that would allow her to be revived.

Squelch. Maori Niizono put her hands inside Mika Furutsuki's head. Her middle and ring fingers slipped inside the edges of the skull, opening enough of a gap for her to force all four fingers in.

Splechhhhelch. Her fingers felt out the bottom of the brain. She felt the bud-like olfactory bulb and the criss-crossed optic nerves. And then she found hard bone — the end of the spinal cord. She made a diamond-shape with her ring and middle fingers of both hands, grabbing the bone.

Maori Niizono took a deep breath, poured all her strength into her arms, and pulled on the brain. *Squeelllchhhhh! Slppp! Slthhhhppppp!* The blood vessels tying the brain to the body snapped noisily while the eyeballs were dragged out with the brain, leaving Mika Furutsuki's eye sockets literally empty.

Snapp! Scrunch! Squelchhh! Maori Niizono put even more force into it. The spinal cord trailed behind as she lifted out the brain, like pulling up a potato. A large number of blood vessels, large and small, came with the spinal cord. Paying them no heed, Maori Niizono held the brain steady with her chin and one hand and pulled the spinal cord free with the other, as calmly as you might pull up a fish on a fishing line. Her year of med school had served her well.

The rest of the spinal cord came out. Maori Niizono cradled the brain in both hands and plopped it into the metal container of liquid nitrogen she'd prepared ahead of time. Some of the liquid nitrogen splashed on her hands, causing frostbite that would take a week to heal, but she had other things on her mind. She shut the lid on the container, making sure it was airtight. Now everything was OK. Mika Furutsuki's brain would freeze perfectly, and as long as she secured a place to store it, it would last several centuries. All she had to do now was invent the technology to revive her.

Funerals are sad occasions.

If the deceased had lived to be over a hundred, perhaps it wouldn't be sad. But funerals for teenagers are sad.

Perhaps if the deceased was an old man leaving behind an immense fortune,

some would find cause to celebrate, but the death of anyone penniless was nothing but a tragedy.

And when the deceased was a suicide, that was extra, super sad. The whole funeral hall was shrouded in gloom.

Mika Furutsuki met all three of the above conditions, so her funeral achieved maximum sadness.

Lots of people cried. Her parents, sister, idol activity friends from high school, and even co-workers from her part-time job were all in tears. She was no longer around to say, “No proble-mika!” with her usual groundless confidence. Mika Furutsuki had passed with her dream yet incomplete. Ever since she was a child she had dreamed of being the greatest idol in the universe, but that had not happened. Her life had been cut short by death, the worst fate the universe had to offer.

Everyone wailed, everyone clutched their heads, and yet only Maori Niizono sat there with a taut smile on her face. The other girls from the idol club thought she’d been driven mad with grief. They were right. She was happy she had been given a purpose. She was enjoying her newfound duty to bring Mika Furutsuki back to life. All this time, she’d been studying medicine simply because her parents demanded it. She had studied every day, shoving questions about why she was doing this to the back of her mind. But now she had a reason to study, a reason to become a doctor: She had to resurrect Mika Furutsuki.

The body showed no signs of what Maori Niizono had done to it; the embalmers had done their work well. She was a little *too* pretty. Given a body with no ears or brain, the embalmers had gotten a little carried away, and had strived for the ultimate corpse, one that lived up to their own ideals. They had ended up transforming her entirely. To anyone in their line of work the results were magnificent, a perfect example of world-class technique. But this was less welcome to the bereaved.

After the funeral, the emotions wrought by this fact erupted. Mika Furutsuki’s sister, Miya Furutsuki, grabbed Maori Niizono. She’d seen the dramatic changes to the body, and instinctively knew Maori Niizono had done something.

“You bitch! What did you do to Nee-sama?!”

She grabbed Maori Niizono’s funeral outfit roughly, with as much force and anger as she could muster, tears welling up in her eyes.

Yet while Miya Furutsuki cried, Maori Niizono gave a mocking laugh.

“Mika-chan? Mika-chan’s gonna be just fine. I’ll bring her back.”

In the face of Maori Niizono’s laughter, Miya Furutsuki lost control, and struck her. She was not athletic enough to do any damage to Maori Niizono. But the blow came as a complete surprise; Maori Niizono had no idea why she was being punched.

“I knew it! You violated my sister’s corpse! You freak! Arghhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!”

Miya Furutsuki was so devastated by the loss of her sister that she scarcely knew what she was saying. She just knew she hated the person in front of her more than anything.

Even as the blows rained down, Maori Niizono kept laughing. “Don’t worry, don’t worry,” she said. “You’ll understand someday. Just you wait. You can see Mika-chan again.”

She patted Miya Furutsuki gently on the head, even as the attacks on her continued.

“Don’t touch me!”

Miya Furutsuki brushed her arm off like a foul thing and put some distance between them. A crowd was gathering, drawn by the commotion. Miya Furutsuki’s parents came over, too.

As she left, Miya Furutsuki hissed quietly enough so that only Maori Niizono could hear.

“I swear I’ll make you pay for this!”

II

Five years after Mika Furutsuki's death, human society faced a grave danger.

The first sign came from the sun. The number of dark patches on the surface of the sun — sunspots — began increasing rapidly.

Sunspots are a sign that magnetic fields are escaping the sun's interior. Like the Earth, the sun has a magnetic field, but since the sun is made of plasma, its rotation can cause chaotically turbulent plasma currents that induce magnetic field fluctuations. While the Earth's magnetic south pole remains fixed at the North Pole, and the magnetic north pole fixed at the South Pole, the sun's magnetic field twists itself up in knots, scuttling around the interior of the star. When these magnetic field lines extend out beyond the sun's surface, sunspots are formed. The more sunspots there are, the more active the fluctuations in the sun's magnetic fields.

So, what happens when the writhing magnetic field lines inevitably intersect with each other? The intersecting lines merge, forming a new magnetic field line. The new line slams back into the surface of the sun, causing an eruption. In other words, a solar flare. Meanwhile, the magnetic lines that remain behind disperse, no longer needed, leaving a large amount of energy behind. This energy is converted to fuel for the plasma around it, sending it flying outward as if launching a pachinko ball. In other words, a coronal mass ejection.

Solar flares are hardly unusual. In fact, the plasma ejected from such flares is what causes auroras when it strikes the Earth's atmosphere. However, the solar flare that occurred this time was of an unprecedented scale. It was a super flare — ten thousand times larger than a normal flare — and it occurred suddenly, without warning.

There are three phases to the damage caused by solar flares. Electromagnetic waves (X-rays and UV rays), particle radiation, and coronal mass ejections of plasma. The electromagnetic waves travel at the speed of light and strike the Earth first. The powerful energy in the electromagnetic waves can strip the

electrons off of the atoms that compose the ionosphere. This glut of free electrons absorbs short wave radiation, rendering all wireless functionality on Earth useless.

At the time of the flare, Maori Niizono was on an airplane, headed to America for an international symposium on regenerative medicine. Thirty minutes after leaving Narita Airport, the plane was cruising through the stratosphere. Maori Niizono was nodding off while reading a dissertation when panic spread through the cockpit. They'd lost all contact with air traffic control. At the same time, the traffic collision avoidance system cut out. Chaos erupted at airports the world over. Mid-flight contact and runway crashes resulted in numerous fires. Massive jets weren't like single-seater planes; it was impossible to fly them based solely on what the eye could see.

"Attention all passengers. Due to an instrument malfunction, we will be returning to Narita Airport. We apologize for the inconvenience."

The captain's announcement sent a stir through the cabin. The tension in the cabin was enough to wake Maori Niizono up. But there was no major panic. At least, not yet.

As the jet circled back towards Narita, the Earth was struck by a vast amount of particle radiation from the sun. The surface was protected by the thick barrier of the atmosphere and was unaffected, but for passengers in the stratosphere that barrier proved insufficient.

"Is there a doctor on board?" the cabin attendant shouted.

"I'm a resident," said Maori Niizono, raising her hand.

"Please come this way."

The attendant led her to the cockpit. A woman in uniform was vomiting repeatedly. There was blood mixed with the vomit.

"This is the captain. She's suddenly taken ill..." the attendant explained.

The co-pilot was focused on flying, looking very nervous.

"Do you have any pre-existing conditions?"

The captain shook her head. *If this wasn't a flare-up of a chronic condition,*

then what could it be...?

“Oh, no! The passengers...” another attendant said, bursting into the cabin, looking white as a sheet. She explained that one passenger after another was collapsing. Symptoms ranged from vomiting, to diarrhea, and even hair loss.

“What!? But those are... Those are symptoms of acute radiation exposure!” exclaimed Maori Niizono to no one in particular.

“Radiation sickness?” Shock spread through the cabin.

There was a loud roar, and the plane lurched heavily to one side. Lightning had struck the plane. Lightning that came from above, despite the fact that it normally originates from clouds, below where the plane was currently flying. This lightning had come from above the stratosphere — from the ionosphere. X-rays and UV rays from the solar flare had heated the ionosphere, causing large-scale convection. Interaction between the electron-dense ionosphere and the Earth’s magnetic field was causing electrical discharges.

“What are you doing?” Maori Niizono snapped, addressing the co-pilot. “Fly this thing properly!”

“Um... It seems like the machinery’s bugged out on me...” The rookie co-pilot was starting to panic.

“You’re kidding!?”

“We’re gonna make an emergency water landing. Please return to your seat...”

Maori Niizono went back to her seat. The aisle was soaked with vomit and diarrhea. All across the world, pilots were coming down with radiation sickness, and planes were falling out of the sky. Even fighter planes and bombers came crashing down, and the nuclear warheads on board ended up contaminating the surface. Every astronaut onboard the international space station perished.

The plane dropped so quickly it felt like they were almost floating. The surface of the water was coming up fast. The shadow of the plane grew larger and larger and then it hit the water, waves churning around it.

In that moment, Maori Niizono’s mind was less concerned with drowning or

radiation poisoning than with Mika Furutsuki. Mika Furutsuki's brain was still preserved in liquid nitrogen in the hospital's underground cold storage unit but if Maori Niizono were to die, it would soon be thrown out like so much garbage. So she couldn't die here. No matter what, she had to survive.

“Hurry! Run! We're sinking! We're sinking fast!”

The co-pilot running the evacuation was a mess. Cold water was pouring in through the hatch. If they didn't get out fast, everyone was going to drown. The passengers hurried, blood and vomit flying through the air in their panic. Some vomit flew towards Maori Niizono's face and she blocked it with an arm, sliding out of the hatch. On the water's surface, she clung to the escape chute/lifeboat.

The plane began to sink. It had taken enough water on board that it began to tilt even before half of the passengers had evacuated. They cut the escape chute free; if it got dragged down with the plane, no one would survive.

On the chute, Maori Niizono looked around her. She could see an island in the distance. *This must be the sea off the coast of Chiba.* She assumed a ship would come for them soon, but with wireless and GPS down, none did. They passed the night without food or water.

Even when the sun went down, it did not get dark. The sky was covered with a band of pink light, writhing like a living curtain — an aurora. The third phase of damage from a solar flare, the coronal mass ejection — the biggest disaster of all — had finally reached Earth. Solar plasma kicked up by the magnetic field pachinko was raining down on Earth at incredible speeds. Normally the Earth's magnetic field intercepted it, causing the plasma to only fall at the north or south poles. But this time the plasma made it through the magnetic field and descended the world over. The plasma struck the electrons in the atmosphere, generating light. And it scrambled the Earth's magnetic field. The magnetic lines thrashed like Yamato no Orochi in a drunken rage. It was a geomagnetic storm. The shifting magnetic fields caused extreme induction in every power line and electronic device, shorting them out. Cities around the world were plunged into darkness.

Artificial respirators at hospitals came to a stop, and patients died in agonizing pain. Traffic signals went out, and cars struck pedestrians, who lay bleeding and

racked with pain. But the worst effect occurred at the nuclear power plants. Cooling systems stopped functioning, and with no hope of help from the outside, plant after plant melted down. With communications out, they had no way to send emergency warnings to nearby residents. With no way to put out the initial fires, the reactors continued burning, spraying radiation into the atmosphere. In the confusion, countless lives were lost.

Maori Niizono survived the catastrophe. The only reason she survived was sheer willpower. Her feelings for Mika Furutsuki saved her. Whether from luck or natural resistance, she developed no immediate signs of radiation sickness. However cancer remained a concern.

Human civilization survived, as well. Whether this was due to sheer willpower is unclear, but somehow they pulled through. To those that remained, a harsh new world awaited. Nuclear plants were left untreated, spewing radiation. Nitrogen oxide created from the particle radiation of the solar flare destroyed the ozone layer, and UV rays brought skin cancer with them. The heating of the ionosphere accelerated the convection of the atmosphere, giving rise to extreme weather. Global warming accelerated, too. This was because the sun's magnetic field was now strong enough to prevent cosmic rays coming from outside the solar system from entering the Earth's atmosphere. Cosmic rays striking the atmosphere form the kernels of clouds. An increase in cosmic rays leads to more clouds, which reflect more sunlight, and causes the Earth to cool; a reduction leads to less cloud cover and global warming.

Solar observation satellites were damaged by the electromagnetic radiation and recorded no data on the solar flare. The number of sunspots didn't decrease, so there was a strong possibility of another similar flare. Although there were demands for more satellites to be sent up as soon as possible, it took five years to lay the groundwork. When a satellite was finally launched, the data it gathered revealed a truth that made mankind tremble. The massive solar flare was not over — in fact it was still very active.

The flare five years ago had not struck the Earth directly but had been of a scale far beyond any previously observed. The sun was now much less stable than before. Strangely enough, the cause of this could not be determined. One

proposal for the cause of the super flare involved a celestial body drawing near the sun. The magnetic fields of the sun and that celestial body merged, and the resulting energy caused the flare. For a while, people speculated that a rogue planet or a dwarf star or some other dark celestial body had moved close to the sun, but after thorough observation, this hypothesis was disproved.

Rather, their data revealed a far stranger truth. By looking at the plasma near the sun, it was possible to determine the direction of the magnetic field lines. But the magnetic lines were cut off, as if swallowed by the void. The severed lines wavered like kite strings, tangling together. By the laws of modern physics, this was utterly impossible. Magnetic lines had to start at the north pole and collect at the south pole. The one explanation that matched the observations was a magnetic monopole. The only possibility was that particles with only a north or south pole alignment were situated there at the ends of the sun's magnetic field lines.

Within the standard paradigms of modern physics, monopoles had only appeared during the initial inflation of the universe. Even if they were to occur now, the universe was expanding, which meant they'd be far and few between. But here they were actually observing them. It seemed appropriate to assume the solar flare was caused by a vast number of monopoles around the sun. In time, the term Monopole Super Flare started to stick.

The possibility that a Monopole Super Flare could strike the Earth directly became critical to the survival of the human race. With the ozone layer destroyed, a second, direct attack would wipe out not just mankind, but all life on Earth. Countermeasures had to be developed immediately.

The ensuing debate was a furious one. Everything from massive plans like blowing up the Yellowstone Supervolcano and protecting the Earth with the resulting aerosol, to smaller plans like distributing free hats, to tricky plans like manipulating the genome to make mankind aquatic — over 761 proposals in all. The plan that was finally put into action was a fusion of genetics and astrophysics.

The core of the plan was to use genetics to create symbiotic bacteria that would offer resistance to radiation and UV rays while using both of those as an energy source. The genes for radiation resistance had been discovered in

bacteria at the site of the Chernobyl accident. They had the ability to make multiple copies of themselves and compensate for the radiation damage by taking the common denominator from those multiplied cells. These could also convert radiation itself into energy and use that energy to live.

Ultraviolet ray defenses were found in sea squirts and mantis shrimp living near the equator. UV rays were particularly strong at the equator, so they'd developed cells that could absorb them.

The short wavelength of UV rays had not previously been an effective energy source, but they fixed that by altering the chloroplast genes of plants. By combining these three sets of DNA, they created a new organism, or Novum Organum.

The Novum Organum were symbiotic bacteria, and, like mitochondria and chloroplasts, were able to function as organelles within the cells of higher life forms. In time, the meaning of the term expanded, and Novum Organum was used to refer to the higher life forms that survived symbiotically with the Novum Organum.

Their plan was as follows. They were going to make nests of Novum Organum on a number of asteroids placed in orbit around the Earth. The primary creatures used for this would be spiders that produced thread reinforced with carbon nanotubes, and jellyfish that bloomed from the ground like plants. The jellyfish would grow outwards like tree rings, the insides slowly hardening. The spiders would live inside the jellyfish, which would protect them from the rigors of the vacuum. The spider's threads, reinforced with carbon nanotube, would descend to the Earth's surface. Like in Ryunosuke Akutagawa's "The Spider's Thread," the asteroids would be tied to the Earth.

With these threads as poles, and a number of such threads radiating outwards, supported by the jellyfish, they would create a kind of mid-air ecosystem. The plan believed the symbiosis between the jellyfish and the spiders would replace the ozone layer, blocking the UV rays. This was a rather feeble plan. Leave everything to genetically modified creatures? How pathetic! But what choice did they have? The damage the Monopole Super Flare had done to mankind left budgets tight, and they could not afford large-scale projects like making a giant space shield. Introducing creatures that would

reproduce autonomously was their only viable option. Barring, perhaps, the free hat plan.

At any rate, the Novum Organum strategy was put into action. Shortly after, something very strange was discovered. More Super Flares were observed; four years and three months after the Monopole Super Flare, one was spotted at Alpha Centauri; six years later at Barnard's Star in the Ophiuchus constellation; seven years and six months later at Wolf 359 in Leo; and eight years later at Lalande 21185 in Ursa Major. What did this mean? Alpha Centauri was 4.4 light years from Earth, Barnard's Star approximately six light years, Wolf 359 approximately 7.8 light years, and Lalande 21185 was approximately 8 light years away. In other words, at the same time as the Monopole Super Flare appeared on our sun, other super flares appeared on the surrounding stars.

When they heard the news, physicists had heart attacks the world over. What these observations demonstrated was nothing less than the demolition of the principle of locality in our universe. In other words, this was a phenomenon that occurred in one location that had immediately influenced events far away without the need to cross the space in between. If this was true, then it contradicted the theory of relativity; it was possible that the order of cause and effect could be reversed.

Physicists slapped each other's cheeks like madmen. This behavior was rooted in a suspicion that they were, in fact, dreaming, but none of them woke from the dream. As time went on, super flares appeared on Sirius A, Sirius B, BL Ceti, and UV Ceti. People started whispering that every star in the universe had super flared simultaneously. Something was happening in the universe that mankind could not begin to understand. This gave rise to cosmic terrors.

But the real terror came from somewhere lower down. Not from space, but from the sky. The Novum Organum designed to replace the ozone layer multiplied quickly. Too quickly. Explosively. Feeding off the radiation and UV rays from the super active sun, their reproductive rates soared, growing into a forest in the sky. If you squinted, you could see it up above the clouds, like a massive pale grey kite. The jellyfish were the bases for the mid-air ecosystem. The jellyfish grew massive fins and rode the strong winds of the stratosphere, remaining aloft for decades. During their lifetimes, they orbited the Earth any

number of times, increasing their numbers via parthenogenesis, and the spiders lived symbiotically with them.

The spiders lowered sturdy threads towards the surface, carrying nutrients up them to the jellyfish. The poles connecting the asteroids had grown like giant trees. From hardened jellyfish, tens of thousands of young jellyfish polyps were born, descending towards the surface like snow. This caused problems for the surface ecosystems. Already weakened by the solar flare, they were now being assaulted by swarms of spiders and jellyfish.

The spiders were carnivores, melting their prey alive in digestive fluids and consuming them. They even targeted mankind. Cities on the equator near the poles were the first to be destroyed. High-rise buildings were perfect for spiders and were wrapped dozens of times over in their webs. Since these webs were reinforced with carbon nanotubes, the webs themselves formed new structures, transforming the city skylines.

The Novum Organum had no natural predators. Humanity, forced by the UV rays to wear hats every time they went outside, could not fight back. As they could cross the stratosphere using massive jellyfish as carriers, natural defenses like mountains and the sea proved useless. With a firm foundation on the equator, the Novum Organum spread north and south. Traditional energy sources for most species depended on plants and photosynthesis, and the only source of energy for that was visible light. But the Novum Organum could derive energy from UV rays and radiation. This meant that Novum Organum could be several times more active than traditional life forms. Their explosive reproduction rates and activity levels helped them spread quickly across the globe. The inferiority of man and other traditional life forms was more obvious than a brushfire.

Paying no heed to these harsh conditions, Maori Niizono threw herself into her efforts to revive Mika Furutsuki. Mankind was facing extinction; she could no longer wait for future technology and would have to resurrect her by her own two hands. The radiation exposure had left her body slowly turning cancerous, but to her, this was unkillling two birds with one stone — she could do trial runs on resurrection technology on herself.

And at last, Mika Furutsuki returned from the realm of the dead. Thirty years

had passed since her death. This was also the birth of the Idol that would control the history of the universe.

III

What the...?

Surrounded by darkness, she was extremely confused.

She felt something, blearily. At first, she hadn't been sure she felt anything. But, gradually, it had come into focus. This was pain. As her pain came into focus, her other senses joined it. They provided seasoning to a solid foundation of pain. Lights, sounds, smells. As her senses woke, so did her sense of self. Remembering that she once had something she called herself, she clutched desperately at it. If she let it go again, she feared her senses would disintegrate and she'd plunge back to the bottom of that dark sea.

Her sight grew clearer. Fragments of information coalesced into a single image. She realized this was the world outside her.

It was a dimly-lit room. An operating chamber? There was a lot of medical equipment around but it was all covered in dust and didn't seem to have been used any time recently.

She heard a voice.

"Mika-chan, can you see?"

There was a person in front of her. No... She wasn't certain it could be called a person. From the face alone, it appeared to be a middle-aged woman. But the rest of her was less recognizable. There were a number of pipes running out of her. Pipes sticking out of her chest, belly, and back. Dozens of pipes, each nearly three centimeters wide, running into her body. And the connections between the pipes and her body were less than perfect, so every now and then gross, dark red fluids would ooze out of the gaps around them. Instead of legs, she had two prosthetics with wheels on the ends, and these wheels were spinning uselessly with a hideous whirring sound. But the freakiest part was her head. Her head was missing a piece. There was a tennis ball sized depression on her right temple. It looked like a clumsy surgery had been performed — it was

covered with all sorts of scabs.

Despite this freakish exterior, when she looked at the older woman's face, Mika Furutsuki felt something. Something warm.

"Maorin...?"

She remembered. She remembered who she was. She remembered what she'd done. Her beloved Maori Niizono. The older woman in front of her was Maori Niizono. Her appearance may have changed drastically, but her face was still recognizable. And her own name was Mika Furutsuki. A girl who had died — who had lost to the shattered dreams of being an idol.

"Maori, where am I? What happened to you? How am I...?"

Mika Furutsuki unleashed a volley of questions. Then she realized just how much her voice had changed, and trailed off, stunned. What a voice. It was like someone had forcibly trained a frog, turning it into a musical instrument.

"Mika-chan, what's the last thing you remember?" Maori Niizono asked, her voice gentle.

"I killed myself. I was so lost. Before I knew it, I was falling from the balcony..."

At the time, nothing had made sense any more. Her struggle to make ends meet, Maori Niizono's proposal, the shock of her sister appearing... It had all been too much, and having reality shoved in her face had caused her to explode.

"Mika-chan, you died that day."

Mika Furutsuki was confused. Died? Died, how? She was right here, thinking. The only conclusion she could draw from that fact was that she was still alive, which meant she hadn't died. She argued as much.

"No, you died. You died, and then came back to life. Mika-chan, look in this mirror."

A mirror was thrust before Mika Furutsuki's eyes. What was reflected in it should have been in the shape of herself. A cute girl with twintails bound by ribbons. Instead...

A butcher's trash pile — that was the closest comparison she could make. What her eyes saw was a pile of dangling organs, hanging there like Christmas tree decorations. Her intestines hung loose, kidneys dumped carelessly in the middle. Between the intestinal tubes she could catch glimpses of thin metallic cords endlessly *twitch twitch twitch twitching* like horsehair worms. A round, transparent sphere, like a crystal ball, was stuck to the dangling bowels. Exposed muscles emerged from the crystal ball, supporting the intestines like duct tape. Surprisingly, the crystal ball was floating in mid-air, so none of the intestines touched the ground. Above the crystal ball was something puffed up, like a balloon; it seemed like this was keeping the crystal ball aloft. The balloon was made of flesh. Arteries and veins ran across it like a net, and occasionally it shifted like it was breathing. The balloon was a stomach. A stomach puffed up to its limits. The thing pumping the stomach full was a set of lungs. Lungs were clinging to the back of the stomach like a parasite, pushing air into it.

Mika Furutsuki searched desperately for a face. At her lowest points, smiling at her own face had always helped her feel better. But there was no face anywhere. All she found was a reddish-brown brain inside the crystal ball, and a lonely pair of eyeballs moving next to it.

“What is this? Disgusting modern art?”

Mika Furutsuki spoke without emotion. Her voice emerged from somewhere in the depths of the intestinal heap.

“That’s you, Mika-chan!” Maori Niizono said, blissfully. “I made you! You’re my masterpiece. I brought you back from the dead!”

Mika Furutsuki looked at the mirror again — at the organ exhibition. *This is me?*

“Aren’t you adorable? You’re so cute! You can be an idol again...”

Cute? This? No face or skin, just a heap of dismembered body parts?

Yet Mika Furutsuki understood. She might be a gory pile of body parts, but it was still her, and she was still cute.

Why did she think that? No normal person would. In fact, part of Mika Furutsuki’s brain was actually Maori Niizono’s brain. Part of the frozen brain

had been damaged. To replace the damaged section, Maori Niizono had transplanted part of her own brain to Mika Furutsuki. By doing so, Maori Niizono's obsessive love for her friend had become a part of Mika Furutsuki. The result was that Mika Furutsuki now loved herself obsessively, no matter what condition she was in.

Cute... Adorable... How can anything be so cute... Staring at herself in the mirror, Mika Furutsuki repeated these words, over and over, feelings of love washing through her. She remembered how Maori Niizono had encouraged her. She'd been able to pursue her dreams of being an idol because of her. She may have been tricked by her talent office, and temporarily lost her way so badly she killed herself, but so what? It all worked out. Life has its ups and downs. So what if she died once or twice? You grow as strong as the number of tears you shed. April showers bring May flowers and everything has a silver lining. This was no reason to give up on her dream! She was going to be an idol. The best idol in the universe!

Something sparked within Mika Furutsuki's brain. With part of Maori Niizono's brain inside of her, the two brains were like a fish in water — like a Tetris block slotted right into place. Maori Niizono gave Mika Furutsuki a foundation for living. Mika Furutsuki finally had a reason to be alive, and that reason was now a part of her.

"Maorin!" Mika Furutsuki cried. "Tell me! How do I move this body! I want to make it dance! I want to sing! I want to be an idol! No matter what happens, I must take the stage!"

"Mika-chan...!" Maori Niizono was on the verge of tears. She was so happy.

She'd spent decades toiling to resurrect Mika Furutsuki, and somewhere deep in her heart she'd wondered if bringing her back from suicide was really the right thing to do. Every night she'd been unable to sleep, worried that she'd kill herself again the moment she came back to life. She'd killed a lot of people, cut them open, harvested their organs and made a really cute body for Mika Furutsuki, but she was still anxious. Would Mika-chan be satisfied with it? Would she resume her idol activities? Full of doubt, she'd finally brought her back, and to her great joy, she was able to meet Mika Furutsuki again, and found her full of the hopes and dreams of being an idol.

Now, as to what lessons Mika Furutsuki could take in this body, that was an extremely interesting problem, but first, we had better get our terminology straight. From this point on, her talents as an idol will bloom. In recognition of her status as an idol, we'll call her the 2nd Generation Idol. Mika Furutsuki before her suicide was the 1st Generation Idol, and after she came back to life she became the 2nd Generation Idol.

Under Maori Niizono's guidance, the 2nd Generation Idol threw herself into her training. Her core methods of movement involved floating with her stomach and expelling air with her lungs. These faint methods of propulsion gave her a top speed of, at best, three kilometers per hour.

Corrosive gas would swell up her stomach, allowing it to rise higher in the air. This functionality was quite well done, and in theory would allow her to go as high as the stratosphere. Food was digested in vitro. Digestive fluids were excreted directly from the intestines, and the food was absorbed after it was dissolved. The swarms of jellyfish drifting across the sky had given the 2nd Generation Idol this means of living. She was quite weak, but she did have ways of defending herself — her nerve jack cables. They were a pair of cords sharpened like a jellyfish's poison stingers. These were the spinal nerves from the original Mika Furutsuki. If she stabbed the brain of another living thing with these jacks, she could take over their mind, controlling them as she pleased. Even better, she could alter their immune system, allowing any and all of their body parts to function as if they were her own. Use of this function would allow her to avoid death by natural causes; she was functionally immortal. Truly an innovative organ. Naturally, there were Novum Organum living symbiotically within her cells, granting her resistance to UV rays and radiation.

Her body riddled with cancer after the radiation exposure on the plane, Maori Niizono had worked to improve her own body, too. Having experimented on herself while working to revive Mika Furutsuki, her body was considerably outdated compared to the 2nd Generation Idol. Her original human flesh was little more than a facade. Inside that shell, the only organ still functional was her brain. Cancer had spread to every other organ, so she'd torn them out and thrown them in the garbage. In their place, she'd borrowed organs from other people. These days, there was no shortage of people on the brink of death, so

by splitting their heads open and granting a merciful death she could slice the rest of them open and steal their organs. However, it was quite rare to find proper organs with no cancer, and whenever she did find them she preserved them for Mika Furutsuki's use, so her own organs were all a patchwork of pieces stolen from any number of people. These patchwork organs were not nearly as functional as normal organs.

Since she was cobbling together bits from several bodies, these results were expected. To elevate the poorly functioning organs to ordinary levels, she took the simplistic approach of making them bigger. Maori Niizono stuck all these oversized organs in a large trailer. Her lungs, stomach, esophagus, lower and upper intestines, pancreas, liver and kidneys were all just jammed in there like a disorganized closet. Over time, the pipes that ran to her body that housed her brain had rusted or grew old and fluid began leaking out around them, but she was too focused on reviving Mika Furutsuki to pay that any heed. She'd cultivated a thin layer of skin over the trailer, with Novum Organum within, converting UV rays and radiation to energy. She got enough to keep the trailer functioning and herself alive but not enough to make herself feel full, so she made occasional expeditions to eat corpses. For that reason, the trailer was fitted with caterpillar treads lined with suction cups.

As the 2nd Generation Idol learned to move her body, she began taking walks with Maori Niizono as part of her idol activities. Their base was in Tokyo — Chiba Prefecture. By this time, the bulk of Japan was under Novum Organum control, the national and local governments having long since collapsed. With the high-rise buildings at their cores, spider threads — reinforced with carbon nanotubes to give them the light/long/sturdy trifecta — stretched here and there. A number of giant jellyfish floated in the sky above, secured to the ground by other threads. Jellyfish polyps fell from the sky like snow, dancing in the air. The few remaining humans survived in the shadows of the jellyfish like sewer rats. The violent activity of the solar flare was slowly but surely culling the last traces of mankind from the surface.

Their walks together were not just dates. Gathering and consuming vital provisions from corpses and dying humans was part of their idol activities. Humans were mostly dwelling in the depths of the sewers or in the hearts of

buildings surrounded by spider webs. When Maori Niizono used her giant form to smash those buildings, they'd scatter like woodlice when the rock above was removed. Some individuals fought back, but the machine guns on the trailer filled them with holes and they were soon gobbled up.

There was only one group of humans engaged in any sort of organized activity. These women called themselves the Vigilantes. They were die-hard anti-technologists and traditionalists. Vowing to take back the Akihabara of yore, they all wore T-shirts featuring moe characters of a bygone age. These were their traditional iconography. Rejecting advanced technology, they survived in the harsh new world by developing their own low tech gear. Piercing their arms, thighs, and sides with drill bits, they attached springs, and used the force of those springs to fire arrows with climbing ropes attached. The arrows caught in the spider webs and they'd leap forward, reeling in the ropes. Repeating this allowed them to move rapidly around. Armed mainly with Molotov cocktails, machetes, and Kalashnikovs, they slaughtered Novum Organum one by one.

Naturally, the Vigilantes opposed Maori Niizono's consumption of other humans. While Maori Niizono was once human, she had taken Novum Organum into her own body; they viewed her as a traitor to the human race and a mortal enemy. The Vigilantes made a lair in one of the floating jellyfish and repeatedly descended to the high-rise where Maori Niizono had made her base, attacking her. To fight back, she had assembled an array of machine and laser guns tricked out with night-vision scopes and the like. With her modern military gear, the Vigilantes stood no chance against her, and their war was in the midst of a long cease fire.

The arrival of the 2nd Generation Idol tipped the balance of this delicate peace. Having gone all out to bring Mika Furutsuki back, the culmination of all her dreams, had left Maori Niizono's guard down. Where she had once seemed invincible, she now had a clear weakness. And the Vigilantes did not let that go unnoticed.

Unaware of this, the two merrily continued their idol activities. Today, they had found an unusually large den of humans and were looking forward to the fresh meat.

“Maorin, one’s running away!”

While Maori Niizono was shoving the group of humans into her trailer, grinding them to mincemeat, one slipped away. A child.

“She’s our future! My daughter! I’m begging you, spare her life!” said one human, stepping forward with arms upraised. Presumably her parent. She was so scared tears and snot were pouring down like waterfalls.

“Oh...well, if it’s a kid, I suppose we could spare her.”

“What? Really?”

“Nope.”

With that harsh warning, bullets pierced both child and parent.

“Wow, Maorin. You’re so merciless!”

“Oh? Well, maybe I’m just excited to be with you, Mika-chan!”

Maori Niizono gathered the humans together with her manipulators, inserting pipes into their flesh, and draining the fluid. The 2nd Generation Idol perched on the mound of flesh, spreading her intestines and spraying digestive fluid, then slurping up the dissolved meat. This might seem cruel, but the world of an idol was a harsh one, and survival of the fittest was an inescapable rule.

They continued their violent idol activities, and before they knew it, it was dark. This was not an error Maori Niizono would ordinarily have made. At night, the sun’s UV rays were gone; it was the realm of traditional life forms. Naturally, mankind had become nocturnal as well, and were far more dangerous at night. She had been too preoccupied with their idol activities and had made a careless mistake.

A powerful voice echoed through their surroundings.

“Your heartless violence ends now!”

“Who?!” Maori Niizono said, dropping her meat in surprise.

“We are the Vigilantes! Those who protect the peace of Akihabara!”

Before they knew it, they were surrounded by at least a few dozen Vigilantes. They all wore goggles to ward off UV rays, and bandages covered their faces.

With a machete in their right hand and a Kalashnikov in their left, they wore T-shirts covered in moe characters to protect their torsos. Holes were placed here and there in their bodies, and arrows with hooks on them were peeping out.

“Mika-chan, stay back,” said Maori Niizono, stowing her brain/weak point in the trailer.

“We will purge this holy land of your evil... Unh!”

Before the Vigilante shock troop leader could finish her speech, she was crushed by the trailer, her innards gushing out of her mouth.

“Go, go, go! Start shooting!”

As the Vigilantes raised their Kalashnikovs, Maori Niizono was already charging their formation. Lives were lost as easily as eggs smashed against the wall. The trailer hit their formation and spun hard, sending bodies flying through the air. As it spun it fired machine and laser guns, slicing through skin, destroying flesh, and spraying blood. The difference in power was clear. If they’d taken bets on the outcome of the battle in that moment, the odds would have been heavily in Maori Niizono’s favor. However...

“Hold it! You make the wrong move and your friend here dies.”

Yes, Vigilantes had snuck up behind and captured the 2nd Generation Idol. With a machete held against her intestines, her hands were tied. Not that she had hands to tie.

“Mika-chan!”

Maori Niizono stopped spinning, and the Vigilantes swarmed over her like ants.

“Ha ha ha! Now the evil monsters are...ow!”

The 2nd Generation Idol sprayed her captor with powerful digestive fluid and escaped when she flinched.

“You bitch! You’ll die for that!”

“Mika-chan! Run!”

Seeing a Vigilante taking a swing at the 2nd Generation Idol from behind,

Maori Niizono tackled them. The 2nd Generation Idol puffed up her stomach, soaring higher, escaping the battlefield, but the Vigilantes threw their own bodies in Maori Niizono's caterpillars, and their flesh caused the machinery to jam. Seizing their chance, they fired a small shaped charge at Maori Niizono's torso, opening a hole in her side. Then they threw a Molotov in the hole, baking her giant organs. Maori Niizono desperately tried to flee, but the Vigilantes got in her wound, pulling the organs out barehanded. Rejoicing at this acquisition of valuable animal protein, they undid the bandages over their faces, and began devouring Maori Niizono's organs. Maori Niizono was eaten alive. Baked from within, her organs were ripped from her and devoured. The pain was beyond imagination.

As they ate her, Maori Niizono desperately fired her machine guns. From point blank range the bullets turned the faces of the gathered crowd into hashed beef. Their compatriots being turned into masses of meat and blood and shit did nothing to discourage the Vigilantes. If anything, they swarmed around Maori Niizono's organs with renewed fervor.

The 2nd Generation Idol watched all this from above, helpless to stop the one she loved from being eaten, from dying. And then, she recognized a face among the Vigilantes. It was Miya Furutsuki, the woman who had once been her sister. Tumors from her skin cancer had left half her face swollen up, but it was still recognizable. She was in the front lines, one of the first to start eating Maori Niizono's organs. Swinging a machete around like a glowstick, she sliced into the organs. As she died, Maori Niizono's final struggles brought a bullet to her. Where Miya Furutsuki's eye had been was now a fist-sized hole. A blizzard of brain-bits sprayed out behind her.

The sight of her former sister's death brought no trace of sadness to the 2nd Generation Idol's heart. All she felt was a violent rage. Rage at having the one she loved murdered before her.

"I'll kill you all! I'll exterminate you!"

Her next idol activity was decided. Revenge. She would bring horrible, painful deaths to the Vigilantes.

IV

Though she had vowed revenge, the 2nd Generation Idol lacked the means to enact it. Having lost her guardian, Maori Niizono, she was little more than a plastic bag floating in the air. When the wind blew she drifted this way and that, completely at its mercy. Even finding food was a challenge. To continue her idol activities, she would need to acquire new skills. She would have to change herself from the 2nd Generation Idol to the 3rd Generation Idol or be left behind by the times.

For an idol to grow, she needed biomaterials. For this, the 2nd Generation Idol set her sights on one type of Novum Organum — the spiders. The same spiders that wove threads reinforced with sturdy carbon nanotubes. They ate human corpses, spreading far and wide; if you threw a rock anywhere they'd go scattering. They came in all shapes and sizes, ranging from a millimeter to a meter.

The 2nd Generation Idol pretended to be dead, luring the spiders in close. The stupid spiders fell for her trick, biting into her intestines. Then her nerve jack cables attacked, pulling them into her body, converting their strength to hers. She was after the spinnerets, the organs that produced their threads. She digested the rest of them leaving only the spinnerets, placing them in all corners of her body. Thus, the 3rd Generation Idol was complete. This was a minor upgrade; the only difference from the 2nd Generation Idol being the dozens of spinnerets poking out of her stomach and intestines and lungs, but the presence of these organs made a huge difference to her mobility. Threads expelled with great force from the spinnerets wound themselves around footholds. Reeling these in allowed her to rapidly move around. She was copying the way the Vigilantes moved with their arrows, but since the carbon nanotube reinforced threads were so sturdy, she could move even faster than them.

Additionally, the threads could serve as weapons. Far stronger and thinner

than piano wire, they could easily slice through human necks, arms, and legs. She still had virtually no defensive ability, so she couldn't attack aggressively, but she could lay traps. She quickly laid traps by leaving tasty corpses where Vigilantes often passed and placing threads all around. These were shockingly effective. She could use the natural human inclination to save those on the brink of death and kill their companions one after another as they came to help.

The 3rd Generation Idol was merely a transitional state. Being an idol meant moving constantly forward. Never forgetting where you came from, never basking in your current glory. An idol satisfied with taking the lives of a few dozen was hardly a life worth living. She had to kill a lot more people. She had to rise up the idol rankings or she'd be crushed by the changing times.

Humans provided the materials for the 4th Generation Idol. To defend her delicate brain, she followed the principle of hiding a tree in a forest, realizing that she could hide it amongst a lot of other brains. The Idol rewired the brains of the humans she killed, turning them into passive slaves, connecting them to her own brain with nerves protected by carbon nanotube membranes. She hid her brain among the slave brains, turning them into a defensive wall. These nerves were powered by signals sent from her own mind, overpowering the individual consciousnesses. As the 4th Generation Idol became a giant brain ball she needed more powerful movement organs. Once again, she used humans. Arranging human legs and arms so they grew in all directions, she could roll around at high speeds. In the hands, she placed Kalashnikovs and machetes stolen from the Vigilantes, allowing her to attack as she rolled. Naturally, she also added digestive organs and sensory organs like eyes and noses and tongues, dozens of each arranged like jewelry. She always took the utmost care with her fashion statements.

Armed with carbon nanotube threads, Kalashnikovs, and machetes, the 4th Generation Idol at last launched an all-out war on the Vigilantes. The Vigilante base was in an airborne giant jellyfish floating midway between the troposphere and the stratosphere—the tropopause. Before the super flare, the jet stream had maintained a constant speed above 30 meters a second, but now the windspeed was several times stronger. The cause was the destruction of the ozone layer. The ozone layer had absorbed UV rays, raising the

temperature of the atmosphere. Because the ozone in the upper stratum maintained a high temperature, a stable atmospheric state was maintained — the upper layers were warm, and the lower layers were cooler — and it was rare for winds to form in the stratosphere. But after the giant flare destroyed the ozone layer, the stability of the stratosphere was lost, and the speed of the jet streams increased. The airborne giant jellyfish rode the strong jet streams like kites, remaining aloft. Anchored to the surface by countless spider threads, the winds never swept them away.

Filling her stomach with putrid gas, the 4th Generation Idol floated upwards, sending out thread after thread, swiftly pulling herself higher. There were dozens of polyps growing like mushrooms under the airborne giant jellyfish. Humans made dens between the polyps and lived there. As the polyps grew and fell off below, they moved their dens higher, to the immature polyps. The jellyfish cut off all harmful ultraviolet waves, and they could store air and heat between the polyps. The spiders lived in the same places and were the Vigilante's rivals for the same resources. Babies were often bitten by spiders and died; combined with the skin cancer the average life span was extremely short. But somehow, they were surviving. Until the 4th Generation Idol arrived.

The 4th Generation Idol's attack caught the Vigilantes completely off-guard. They were prepared for attacks on the surface but had never dreamed she would come to them up here. This would cost them dearly. Clutching to old-fashioned ideas of what an idol could be, they were left behind by the changing times. Idols these days don't just make themselves available — they actively chase the public down. Failure to keep up with the latest trends is punishable by death.

“Gahhhhhh!”

Shrieks echoed between the polyps. The out-of-touch Vigilantes were helpless before the overpowering idol aura radiated by the 4th Generation Idol. She'd spent the week before her assault sunbathing, stocking up on energy gathered by the Novum Organum. Down time was of vital importance to any idol, and she was a major proponent of taking it easy. Relaxation was an important idol activity, too. It allowed her to unleash all that energy in that moment. It was so important to make that transition between on and off stage. When she was on

stage she had to keep her body moving, killing all the humans. She had to hit the steps just as she'd practiced, spit those threads, fire her Kalashnikovs, decapitate with those machetes... Seeing her like this, it was tempting to describe her as an organism bred for slaughter. The humans all screamed aloud in the face of the 4th Generation Idol's sprightly dance and cuteness. As their cries rained down on her, the 4th Generation Idol knew that she was really shining. This was what she could do when she threw herself into her idol activities.

At last the screams died down, and her slaughter ended with no requests for an encore. The 4th Generation Idol finished by harvesting spare organs from the dying humans, consuming their flesh, and slurping up their blood. She felt amazing. Years of preparation had made these idol activities a tremendous success. As a reward to herself, maybe she'd acquire a little house. There was a gap between the polyps where the Vigilantes had lived. She should remodel it and make it a place of her own!

It was some time before the 4th Generation Idol felt like doing much of anything. A classic case of burnout. She wasn't sure which direction to take her idol activities next. Her first great success had been so dazzling she was fixated on it, unable to take the next step forward.

The Idol was self-produced. Creating her characters, expanding upon her strengths — all of that depended on her alone. But the 4th Generation Idol was unsure what path she should follow. So she returned to her roots. What was it she'd really wanted to accomplish as an idol? She'd wanted to sing and dance and bring smiles to her audience. She'd definitely never wanted to strike fear in their hearts. Or fire Kalashnikovs wildly. Or carve organs out of the dying. Idols weren't supposed to slaughter humans, they were supposed to entertain them. This might seem obvious, but the 4th Generation Idol had forgotten it. And by the time she remembered, it was already too late. She had killed everyone who could have been a fan. Fans were everything to an idol. An idol with no fans was no idol at all. Idols could not exist in isolation; their fans completed them. How ironic that her idol activities had destroyed the thing that made her an idol.

She scanned the surface, but it seemed the destruction of the Vigilantes had been a huge setback to the human's territory. There was nowhere left for

humans to live in Tokyo. No matter where she went, it was spiders, spiders, spiders, jellyfish, spiders, and jellyfish. When she was lucky enough to find a human they already had spiders inside them and were being eaten alive. The existing ecology was collapsing. Even the cockroaches were declining in the face of these spiders.

She had to find some fans. First she made herself available, then she chased her public down, and now she'd grown into an idol that searched for fans. In these times, it was not simply enough to go where the fans were; a good idol had to actively search. The 4th Generation Idol was ill-suited for long distance travel. The Idol adapted herself to the times. Thus, the 5th Generation Idol was born.

The 5th Generation Idol used the airborne giant jellyfish as the base for her body. She altered the 700 meter jellyfish so it would be part of her. She placed her brain in the stomach membrane at the center of the jellyfish, sending her nerves out through all parts of its body. All it could do was float on the wind pressure, lacking any real maneuverability, so she made an air bladder, a sphere that could supply putrid gas. The jellyfish could no more swim against the wind current than plankton can, but by using her brain's control to turn it, ejecting putrid gas, and taking sea water on as ballast, she managed to free it from the winds, elevating it to the level of nekton. She added eyeballs to the tips of the tentacles, allowing her to carefully observe the surface from the sky above.

At last, the 5th Generation Idol launched her first world tour. No planes, trains, or automobiles, just a slow journey alone by jellyfish. Her goal: to discover anything that might become a fan. The solar winds grew more frequent, auroras glittered in the night sky, the sea was covered in a red tide caused by all the creatures that had died to ultraviolet waves, and in an age where Novum Organum replaced both plants and animals she was the lone idol on Earth.

Starting with a tour across Japan, she set out to see the world. She followed the Ryukyu Island chains, entered the Eurasian continent, and headed south towards Oceania. On Sri Lanka, she found spider threads descending from the asteroids in orbit around the Earth, surrounded by a swarm of hardened jellyfish that filled the stratosphere. Looking up, the jellyfish dispersed the

sunlight, glowing like thin clouds, and when she looked closer she could see their digestive systems moving. The hardened jellyfish were not dead, but still alive, gathering moisture through the incredibly long tentacles that stretched all the way to the surface. The wind currents tore pieces off the hardened equatorial jellyfish, and these formed new jellyfish, embarked on a journey to the south.

Since the hardened jellyfish were blocking the ultraviolet light at the equator, perhaps the old ecology was making a comeback, the 5th Generation Idol hoped. This hope proved foolhardy. As she neared the equator, she saw that the tentacles dangling from the stratosphere had consumed all living things, leaving a massive sea of death behind. Since all higher forms of life had been wiped out, plankton had proliferated, and with nothing to eat their dead, they had rotted. The blue sea was gone, leaving a vast wake of chemical sludge as far as the eye could see.

When the 5th Generation Idol saw the tentacles from heaven moving to consume her, she hastily left Oceania. After that, she spent a few hundred years searching through Europe, Africa, and the Americas, but she found not a single fan. It took a lot out of her to perform concerts in venues devoid of fans.

The 5th Generation Idol couldn't bear the sadness. She needed a strategy, something that would provide her mental support. She would have to create fans. In the next age, it would be standard for idols to create their own fans.

But when it came to making fans, in this age, there was nothing to make them out of. All vertebrates, down to the smallest fish, had been hunted by the jellyfish and were all endangered species. There were plenty of spiders and jellyfish, but she was extremely unsure about turning them into fans. Of the two, the spiders seemed slightly more feasible. In fact, with their complex webs, spiders had much more complex nervous systems than other arthropods, though hardly ideal. Your average mind might consider elevating the spiders into intelligent life. But the ultra mega cute genius Idol thought otherwise. She decided to construct something out of both spiders and jellyfish.

How could she create intelligence? All *that* required was a neural network. A neural network was modeled after the operations of nerves in the brain. Nerve cells could be either neurons, which functioned like electric lines, or synapses,

which functioned like antenna; electrical signals from one neuron would cross the spaces called synaptic clefts as neurotransmissions, arriving at other neurons. The transmission rate in this process is affected by the input signal in the synapse. Learning is based on these changes to transmission effectiveness. Changes to transmission effectiveness can not only improve the frequency of transmission — they can also lower it. Additionally, the flow of information is not one-sided — it is also possible for feedback to return received information to the input layer. The human brain contains approximately 100 trillion nerve cells arranged like this, resulting in an incredibly complex information network.

Unfortunately, jellyfish lacked a central nervous system. To replace this, the Idol planned to make the jellyfish themselves into nerve cells. The cells in human brains used ion gradients to transmit information via changes in the electric potential, but the jellyfish nerve cells transmitted information via the movements of the spiders within them. She made a jellyfish network by connecting tentacles to bell shapes, filling the tentacles with spiders. When a stimulus was received from a different jellyfish, the spiders were excited, and they passed that baton down the lines of spiders, communicating the information. So how did she establish the weighting required for learning? In biological brains, information transmission speeds are increased by wrapping nerve cells in a type of cell known as oligodendroglia. The insulation provided by oligodendroglia, like the coating used on electric wires, makes it possible to transfer information effectively. Within the jellyfish network, the oligodendroglia functionality was provided by spider thread. She placed spider threads in frequently used jellyfish interiors so that when spiders touched the threads the vibrations instantly ran down them, swiftly transmitting the information. Her plan was to make hundreds of trillions of jellyfish like this, placing them all over the Earth's sky and oceans, making a massive neural network on a planet-sized scale. We could call it the Earth Fan Conversion Plan.

She did not have time to hand-make hundreds of trillions of jellyfish nerve cells one by one. Even if she could make one a day, it would take three hundred million years to achieve her minimum goal. Just thinking about working for that long made her want to throw up. So she decided to leave the reproduction to the jellyfish themselves. She established a life cycle in which they would focus on reproduction when young, and as they matured, connect to each other as

nerve cells. When first born they were only a few centimeters in size, but as they grew, their bodies would become hundreds of meters long and connect to nearby jellyfish nerve cells. Repeating this, the network would propagate itself, gradually achieving intelligence by adapting to environmental data.

After three million years, the Earth was completely covered in jellyfish. The sea and sky were filled with floating bells and tangled tentacles. If you looked very carefully, you could see the translucent tentacles pulsing, and black things scuttling through them. Those were the spiders. Spiders that were carrying information. Spiders provided the jellyfish with nourishment and consumed the jellyfish when they died. With plenty of energy provided by the sun's radiation, the network was operating at full power.

As the network learned, it began to show glimmers of intelligence. The jet streams had expanded as high as the stratosphere, but after a few hundred thousand years of reactions by the network they were slowly weakened, calming the raging storms. Several hundred thousand years of orders from the network in space resulted in tossing the ocean waters until the axis tilt was corrected and the seasons were eliminated. The jellyfish network ran on solar radiation and had no need of excess environmental changes. Meanwhile, this was pure hell for traditional life forms, whose already fragile ecosystems were utterly decimated.

By this time, the Idol had continued her process of minor upgrades, and was now in the 11th Generation. The jellyfish network was not what she would call a satisfactory fan. The network's intelligence resembled a conscious mind but was not one. Certainly, the jellyfish network had intelligence. But it was, figuratively speaking, a mind without a face. With humans, there was a clear link between their actions and their internal reasoning; they would wave glow sticks to express their joy, shove the person in front of them out of anger, or blow a fortune at an auction trying to score a ticket. Meanwhile, the jellyfish network's internal conditions were linked to its actions, but those conditions were never what we'd call 'reason'. The network's actions were always the result of the output from the whole network or the result of what the network had learned; they were always changing. In other words, it never took action based on individual emotions or specific reasons, but always as a result of information

processed by the entire network.

This was not what the Idol had expected. She'd modeled the jellyfish network on the human brain, but what it produced was intelligence she could not comprehend. To her, consciousness went hand-in-hand with specific reasons and emotions. Over time, those formed her 'self.' The jellyfish network had no 'self.'

The Idol grew to fear the jellyfish network. This was a shock as great as if the flood of audience members into a concert hall had turned out to be zombies. Adding fuel to this fire, lately the jellyfish network had become aware of the Idol's existence, viewed her as a potential threat to its continued existence, and begun to attack. It was like there were spears being hurled from the crowd.

After tens of millions of years of hard work, her attempt at creating a fan had clearly ended in failure. For all her years as an idol, her fan count remained at zero. There were days when she considered giving up on the whole idol thing. But each time, she remembered her high school days, when throwing herself into her idol activities had made everything gleam. How her heart sang when she got her dance steps right, the thrill when the spotlight caught her, the rush when the audience roared, and the certainty that she was shining bright. She wanted to be an idol. She didn't want to let her dream end as a dream. With that thought in her heart, she threw herself into her idol activities once more.

The jellyfish network had spread to a degree unprecedented by any Earth species, but its demise was quite sudden. The unnatural activity levels of the solar flares that had gone on for several million years abruptly came to a halt. Perhaps as a backlash from all the magnetic energy it had been unleashing, sunspots became extremely rare. The sun released far less of the UV rays and radiation that served as the Novum Organum's primary energy source. As if it had been waiting for that, the ozone layer reformed, further depriving the jellyfish network of the UV rays it needed to survive and sealing its doom. All over the planet, jellyfish nerve cells died. Unable to obtain sufficient energy, the jellyfish turned brown, their bodies disintegrating. The massive web in the sky came apart, and the spiders that had served as the nerve information carriers consumed the jellyfish corpses. Even then, the network was intelligent, and tried to fight this threat. It made hydrogen gas balloons and tried to raise itself

up to the ionosphere, diminishing the impact of the ozone layer. It tried to destroy the ozone layer with CFC gases.

If it had been given more time, perhaps it would have found effective countermeasures. But the cessation of the sun's activity levels came out of nowhere. Like a brain destroyed by lack of oxygen, the jellyfish network came apart, and was soon unable to function cohesively. At last, there were not even enough clusters for it to be considered intelligent at all. The cooling of the Earth also took its toll. As the sun's magnetic field weakened, the number of cosmic rays striking the Earth increased, causing clouds to germinate and in turn increasing the albedo. Ice formed again at the poles, marking the beginning of a new ice age.

The quieting sun and encroaching ice age were threats to the Idol as well. She, too, had used Novum Organum as a source of energy. Fortunately, she did not burn energy on the massive scale the jellyfish network did, so was able to survive for a while eating dead jellyfish. But this was not a long-term solution. The corpse buffet available to her now would eventually disappear. She needed to make her body eco-friendly. She needed a *make-over*.

Thus, the Idol entered her 12th Generation. This generation she was a shut-in idol. She covered her body with ice, with carefully constructed muscles sticking out like fins that allowed her to use the power of waves to obtain the energy she needed. These muscles would move in response to electrical stimuli but if they were moved by outside forces they generated electricity instead. Other nourishment she obtained from tentacles she dangled into the depths of the ocean, using filtration to harvest plankton.

Until the surface ecosystems recovered, the 12th Generation Idol continued her shut-in life. This took approximately three hundred million years. During that time, the ordinary lifeforms lurking in the ocean depths to escape the Novum Organum slaughter rose up, filled the seas, and once more stepped out onto land.

The first to make landfall were shrimp, crabs, and other crustaceans; they shrank and grew more varied, evolving into insect-like creatures. The crustaceans were followed by anemones. No longer rooted to one spot, the anemones evolved powerful muscles, moving around rapidly. Using an array of

tentacles for legs, whenever they found a crustacean, dozens of legs would snake out and haul it in towards the central mouth. They were followed by sea cucumbers and shellfish.

Some unbelievably large-scale adaptive evolutions later, anemone appeared that could use membranes to glide across the sky and whose tentacles had hardened into scoops that could dig holes. Seizing her chance, the 12th Generation Idol abandoned her shut-in lifestyle and became the 13th Generation Idol. Covering her entire body in narrow anemone tentacles she became able to run across land, and, thanks to surface tension, water.

The 13th Generation Idol was determined to make herself some fans this time. Convinced her previous failure was because she had set herself the difficult task of making a world-sized brain, this time she swore to progress slowly but surely. This time she resolved to follow the mechanisms of traditional evolution. In other words, she protected anemones that exhibited conscious behavior, and slaughtered those that did not. By repeating this, eventually a strain would appear with a will of its own. She wasn't sure how many millions of years it would take, but it was the safest path. After all, in theory, this was how mankind had come to be.

However, once she actually tried, it proved easier said than done. For starters, what was conscious behavior? It would have been so much easier if the anemones had begun searching for a way to explain their consciousness scientifically, but the whole reason she was trying to help them evolve was because they were doing no such thing. To tell if they had consciousness or not required her to interpret what was going on inside the anemone. She had no idea what being an anemone was like at all. Her plan was doomed from the start.

On top of that, a decisive blow arrived. The Monopole Super Flare attacked again. Just as the anemones and shrimp and crabs and sea cucumbers and shellfish had covered the surface, the solar flare wiped them all out. The 13th Generation Idol was disappointed. Afterwards, she made measurements through a biological telescope she grew on the ocean's surface and confirmed that once again the Monopole Super Flare had occurred simultaneously throughout the universe — but there were exceptions. For some reason young

stars, ones less than three trillion years old, had no flares. No matter how much she pondered it, she couldn't crack this mystery. Either way, it was clear her plan to grow the anemones into intelligent fans had failed.

It seemed like it was time for her to head to outer space. The Idol made up her mind. It was quite common for huge breakthroughs to happen only once an idol left their homeland. But there was a lot of work to be done before she could go abroad. In the past she would have needed a visa and a passport, but now she could avoid all that troublesome paperwork as long as she simply had a massive energy source. The problem was that the energy this required was *too* massive. The chemical energy in the anemone corpses would never reach the necessary volume. She had to do something truly spectacular.

She began by assembling a great number of satellites out of biomaterials and placing them outside the range of geostationary orbit. Orbits outside of that range had a rotational speed slower than the rotation of the Earth. This created a discrepancy between the satellites' orbital speed and the rotation of the earth's magnetic field, which allowed the use of electromagnetic induction to generate electricity. Theoretically, the energy obtained this way would be in proportion to a decline in the Earth's rotational speed. The amount of electricity generated by each satellite was quite small, but all the satellites together produced a huge amount.

She spent ten thousand years generating electricity. During that time, the energy she gathered was used to grow the bio-satellites. From the satellites she grew myxomycetes, which functioned as a vacuum-compatible thread that tied the satellites together. The array of bio-satellites gave the Earth a ring like Saturn's, and by binding them together the ring grew in size and solidarity. Once the ring was solidified, she began lowering myxomycete threads into the atmosphere. When the myxomycete threads reached the ground, they took a firm grip on the surface. Since the ring was orbiting slower than the Earth's rotation, these threads were stretched, and she used that stretching to generate more electricity.

So what to do with all this energy she was generating? Create antimatter. The interior of the ring became a particle accelerator, and day after day, it manufactured antimatter. Whether one was building physical strength or

making antimatter, all it took was a little bit of effort each and every day. Behind every idol's success was this sort of hard work behind the scenes. She stored the antimatter carefully, ensuring it didn't get caught in the magnetic field and come into contact with matter. This antimatter would be of vital importance on her journey through space.

But an expedition to outer space required not just antimatter, but alterations to her body. While prepping for her trip she passed through three generations, but by the 17th Generation Idol she was finally ready. The 17th Generation Idol drilled a hole in an asteroid and cultivated her brain and muscles and circulatory system inside of it, preparing a mini-ecosystem of myxomycetes and fleas. These repaired any damage to the organs inside the 17th Generation Idol and removed any cancerous cells.

She was ready. All she had left to do was wait for the necessary volume of antimatter. The antimatter she made was stored inside the 17th Generation Idol's belly, and the mutual annihilation that occurred when it struck matter would be her propulsion fuel. However, some alarming news reached her. The light of the fixed stars around the solar system was declining. Perhaps some would say that if mysterious solar flares could occur then mysterious star dimming could occur, too, but this dimming was spreading like a plague through the nearby stars. The speed at which it spread was surprisingly fast, a decent fraction of the speed of light. Stars affected by the dimming eventually disappeared entirely, as if they'd gone out. By her calculations, in a few thousand years this phenomenon would reach her solar system.

She had yet to reach her intended volume of antimatter, but the 17th Generation Idol moved up her schedule for launching into outer space. She didn't know the cause of this mysterious plague, but she definitely didn't want to get anywhere near it. If she ran low on antimatter she could stop off at another solar system's star and borrow the rotational energy from it.

Bye-bye, Earth. Bye-bye, solar system. I don't know if I'll come back. My idol activities here were so much fun!

Two thousand years after the 17th Generational Idol left the solar system, the plague arrived. The plague was actually a swarm of tiny machines, less than a millimeter each. The swarm covered Mercury and Venus and Earth and Mars

and the asteroid belt and Jupiter and Saturn and Uranus and Neptune and Pluto and the rest of the Kuiper belt, and began disassembling them. They began making a Dyson sphere using all the matter in the solar system.

These machines had been developed by an intelligent life form on one planet to prevent extinction at the hands of the Monopole Super Flares. The initial machines weren't as accomplished as the current incarnation, but they were given orders to prevent super flares by any means necessary. The machines followed those instructions and created descendants that stood a better chance of preventing the flares. By repeating Lamarck inheritance over generation after generation they reached a point where they could prevent super flares by disassembling planets and building Dyson spheres around stars. However, disassembling their planet drove the species that created the machines to extinction. The machines were capable of multiplying and altering themselves and were no longer possible to control. Once the machines completed the Dyson sphere in their home system, they headed out towards other stars.

These machines had no consciousness to call their own. All they had was a powerful drive to effectively perform their prime directive. That directive told them to prevent the solar flares but did not contain any language limiting them to just their home system. Therefore, they flew from star to star, expanding their Dyson sphere construction. These lightweight machines possessed no propulsion systems; instead the Dyson spheres fired laser beams that propelled them through the back-reaction. They had no need to slow themselves; when they struck the target planet they would use the local resources to manufacture more of themselves and begin converting matter into a Dyson sphere.

The Earth had survived the Super Flare and the rise of the Novum Organum, but this assault was too much for it. All creatures went extinct, even the bacteria buried deep beneath the surface. There were actually some microscopic creatures on Enceladus, one of Saturn's moons, that used the heat from the tidal force as an energy source, but these, too, perished.

Heedless to all of this, the Idol continued her idol activities in space, just as she pleased. Whenever she ran low on antimatter, she set down on a nearby planet, took a thousand-year rest, and then set off for her next destination.

Planets with life were not all that unusual, and each time she found one she borrowed those creatures' matter, upgrading herself.

There were many creatures in the universe unimaginable from the standpoint of evolution on Earth. For example, there was a forest of towering crystal trees that used the trace minerals in the ground to grow themselves. The planet the trees lived on had an elliptical orbit, so once a year, like clockwork, a great storm arrived, ripping fragments from the trees, which formed the cores of new children.

On a planet with low gravity, there were things like giant living flyswatters that ate the smaller creatures that filled the air. These creatures were made from all sorts of parts and could fuse or dissect these parts as needed to customize themselves.

On a planet where winds always blew, she found a creature that used wind energy to achieve homeostasis. Every now and then, she found a creature that was intelligent. The Idol traded with them, or waged war against them. But while intelligent, none were conscious — they could not become fans. She could not hold concerts or handshake events.

And so time passed. So much time it seemed pointless to even think about it. The experience she obtained finally made the Idol realize just what she should do about the fan problem. She realized just what consciousness actually was.

V

What is consciousness? A biological function humans obtained through evolution? That is one answer.

But is that really all? That seems unlikely. Let's try a simple experiment. Take the smartphone in your pocket and open up an idol rhythm game. Without thinking about it, pick the song you like the most and have played more times than you can count. Were you able to set a new high score? All right, well, play through the same song again. But this time raise your consciousness. Think about it in detail, about how you need to move each finger, where you have to tap each note.

I'll bet you anything your score is significantly lower than when you played without really thinking about it. You were using all that energy on your consciousness, and the critical information processing functions suffered as a result. Consciousness interferes with our efficiency. Living in nature with our consciousness constantly active is high cost, low return. Natural selection would never give rise to a function like that. If a lion attacks you, it's far faster to run without any internal process than to consciously think, "Ooh, scary!" and decide to run for it.

So how did consciousness come to be? The key point here is that consciousness is not a biological function we're born with. Quite the opposite: consciousness is a cultural function transmitted to the individual after birth. Or we could put it this way — consciousness is a software downloaded into the individual by civilization.

Then the question becomes, how can we download the consciousness software? Listen carefully. Read closely. I am about to record the answer here.

Consciousness is downloaded into individuals from idols.

Each time we see an idol, fans identify with them. As the idols throw themselves into singing, dancing, or chatting we see ourselves in them, admire

their hard work, and feel like we can work harder tomorrow.

When I say fans identify with them, I don't mean that fans take on the idol's consciousness. Fans grow passionate about the idols, wave glow sticks, grow obsessed with their charm, simulate a substitute for the idol within themselves — and only then is their consciousness born.

Idols become idols because they love idols. This is where the connections between consciousnesses are born. Consciousness propagates and proliferates when an idol fan becomes an idol.

Here 'idol' is used in the broad sense, not the narrow. There is no need to be on TV for consciousness to be propagated. A classroom idol or someone idolized by their friends will also do the trick. It need not even be a modern person — fictional creations can also propagate consciousness. Characters in idol anime are muses that spread consciousness to all they touch.

Human consciousness is born as a result of passion for idols. In most cases, consciousness is born before adolescence, but there are those unlucky few who go their whole lives without it.

Mika Furutsuki and Maori Niizono spread consciousness to many with their high school idol activities.

The Idol who had been Mika Furutsuki realized all of this. The existence of consciousness wasn't the mandatory condition for an idol to exist; an idol's existence was the mandatory condition for consciousness to exist. And any life form capable of enough information processing to perceive the idol's existence was capable of downloading consciousness.

She changed the focus of her idol activities. She no longer interfered with evolution to try and produce consciousness — instead she went to life forms with sufficient information processing capabilities, gave herself the same body as them to make it easier to identify with her, and went about her idol activities. In this way, fans were born, and so was consciousness. Hundreds of millions of years of idol activities were at last rewarded. Every now and then conflicts would arise with an alien species and she'd be forced to destroy their entire planet, but she kept her chin up. What people wanted from idols wasn't

perfect dancing or singing or consciousness creation, but the sight of them doing their very best, even if that wasn't very good. Even after smashing a few hundred or thousand planets she just had to try harder tomorrow. The Idol continued touring the planets of the universe. Consciousnesses were born across the universe, and the universe became filled with conscious minds.

Approximately one trillion years later, the universe began to die. Dark energy was accelerating the expansion of the universe, making matter increasingly scarce, and thus harder for new stars to be born. By this time the Idol was on her 74,758,071,090th Generation but still not ready to retire.

Thus, she decided to make a new universe. She caused a supernova explosion and made a black hole. Black holes are a hole in space of infinite depth; from the outside they have a finite size, but inside they go on forever — a black hole is a universe in itself. Then the Idol made a second black hole, and controlling the two black holes perfectly, she crashed them together. The impact was transmitted to the internal universe in the form of a spatial distortion. This spatial distortion would leave traces behind, detectable as cosmic background radiation. One day, intelligent life evolved, and it observed the cosmic background radiation. The cosmic background radiation data stored on their computers began functioning as an informational intelligence. The Idol had broadcast her own information to the next universe in the form of cosmic background radiation. As an informational intelligence, the Idol hid herself within the media and began propagating consciousness.

Proliferating herself this way, the Idol traveled through countless universes, creating innumerable consciousnesses. In time, she realized that universe proliferation was not traveling in a single direction in time. A frame in which time flowed from the past to the future was simple when seen from the perspective of a single universe; yet within the larger multiverse it was quite common for her children to be her own ancestors. The multiverse was shaped not like a tree growing in one direction, but a net-like rhizome. The shape of it reminded her of something. The neural network.

The multiverse processed information with the universes serving as nerve cells. And any being with sufficient information processing capability could grow obsessed with an idol and develop a consciousness. The multiverse was no

exception. Once the multiverse perceived the Idol's activities, it became a fan and grew a consciousness. As a result of the multiverse's consciousness, the universes, the galaxies, the solar systems, the stars, the planets, the continents, the oceans, the bacteria, the molecules, the atoms, and the quarks all developed consciousnesses, albeit very faint ones. And everyone loved idols.

The multiverse's consciousness reached back into the past and began altering events to bring about its existence. It distorted the flow of time in the Idol's universe of origin, layering the past and future in a higher dimension. This was the cause of the Monopole Super Flares. As stars in the past and future were in contact with themselves via a higher dimension their magnetic fields affected each other, causing the flares. Humans trapped inside a mere three spatial dimensions perceived this to be magnetic field lines leading to nothing and mistakenly believed monopoles must be involved. The reason young stars never produced flares was because they had no past version of themselves to interact with.

The multiverse's alterations even extended to extremely minor details. When Mika Furutsuki was in high school, Maori Niizono's alarm clock rang early, bringing the two of them together, and giving Mika Furutsuki the confidence to become an idol. Additionally, when Mika Furutsuki killed herself, the ambulance took her to the hospital run by Maori Niizono's parents. This led directly to the birth of the Idol and the origin of the multiverse's consciousness.

When the multiverse has consciousness, determinism and free will are in perfect harmony. Physical laws and rules of causality believed to be free will are actually free and conscious choices made by the multiverse. Additionally, time paradoxes are impossible. The past and the future must always be in harmony from the perspective of the consciousness.

The multiverse's consciousness went beyond the universe where the Idol originated, and headed further into the past. And after passing through countless universes, the consciousness that started with Mika Furutsuki reached one universe in particular. This was its terminal point. Beyond that the information was too degraded and it could not maintain its consciousness.

In that universe, the consciousness's information took the form of a novel. A

novel about how a girl named Mika Furutsuki struggled to become the greatest idol of all. A reader who completes this novel will empathize with Mika Furutsuki, identify with her, and develop a consciousness of their own.

By reader, I mean you.

By now I'm sure you know what the title of this novel means. You are the Last and First Idol. You are the last being to inherit the consciousness derived from Mika Furutsuki, and at the same time, the first.

You are the sole being in your universe with a consciousness.

The start of this novel stated that you have a calling. I'm sure you understand by now. Your calling is to spread consciousness.

You must become an idol. As an idol, make others obsessed with you, empathize with you, identify with you, and develop consciousnesses of their own.

Well? Go forth and be idolized. You're already shining bright!

Evolution Girls

Prologue

Light...!

What happened? Everything. The beginning of everything.

The universe filled with light.

The overflowing potential energy from the inflaton caused violent fluctuations of the electromagnetic field. Fluctuations meant particles. These fluctuations manifested countless photons. And those photons went flying. They're incredibly fast. Obviously. Photons have no mass. Particles without mass fly at the top speed achievable in the universe, the speed of light. That speed was far more than 300,000 kilometers per second. We're talking ten to the power of thirty times that. This age had no truck with the tedious speed restrictions that would be applied later on.

Faster! Faster! The photons raced away in all directions. Covering light years, parsecs. Linking unbelievable distances in an instant, leaving no territories cut off. Diversity was the cost. The wave of photons from far, far away painted everything the same blinding white.

But in time, the age of the great race drew to an end. The universe was cooling off. It had used up the potential energy hidden in the inflaton field. Too many massive particles like electrons and quarks and neutrinos had been made. Quarks fused with each other to form nuclei, and electrons joined in, giving rise to hydrogen and helium, but the price was significant. The vacuum itself began to cool, and phase transition developed, like when water turns to ice. But in this case, it was dimensional compactification. There were once eleven dimensions but as the energy state degraded that number shrunk. Just as gases become liquids and liquids become solids, loss of energy always results in a corresponding loss of active states. Dimensions that once were infinite were wound up, their former shape replaced with something pathetically small, resulting in something hardly appreciably different from a mere three spatial

dimensions.

As the dimensions froze, limitations on the speed of light became stricter. This was because the surplus compactified dimensions were causing congestion. Every time light tried to travel a certain distance it had to pass through the labyrinth of wound up dimensions. Winding around in this maze of excess dimensions required that light to travel a considerable additional distance.

However, not everything was wound up like that. They were rare, but some dimensions were not frozen. Merely supercooled. Water can retain its liquid state below freezing if and only if there are no impurities or catalysts to germinate cores. Likewise, in degraded-energy spaces, higher-dimensional status survived in certain flat domains. But this would not last long. Supercooled states collapse at the slightest stimuli.

Eventually, the areas that had maintained a supercooled state began to disintegrate. It was the inevitable result of laws governing micro-regions and quantum theory. Perfectly stable environments do not exist. Everything is uncertain. Inescapable quantum uncertainties greater than any chaos were destroying those supercooled dimensions.

As space continued to cool, the supercooled dimensions tried desperately to protect themselves. Fighting against a fate they could not escape, their destruction ever encroaching.

Youko Sasajima's mind was quietly dying. The culprit that had driven Youko to the brink was called *Evolution Girls* — *Evo Gals* for short. It was the most popular mobile game at the moment. The game revolved around anthropomorphized versions of extinct species. It had launched six months earlier, but the tie-in anime had just ended, leading to a spike in popularity.

Lately, the *Evo Gals* anime was on many fans' AOTY lists, but when it first launched it had gone under the radar. You had to be a real hardcore otaku to have given it a look.

Youko wasn't that hardcore. She was a lightweight otaku, only watching three or four anime a week. She had accidentally caught the first episode of *Evo Gals* in real time, but unfortunately, she had failed to grasp the appeal of the series.

The show followed the recent moe anthropomorphization trend, in which non-human things are depicted as characters. *Evo Gals* characters were based on ancient species. In the first episode, the main character travelled back in time five hundred million years, was rescued by some girls (who were anthropomorphized extinct species) and set off on a journey looking for a way back to modern times. This was occasionally interrupted by explanations by a museum curator, making it a very educational anime. The character designs weren't egregiously sexualized, either, so it would not have been out of place airing on an educational channel. At the time, Youko decided this wasn't what she was in the mood for and dropped the series.

The buzz changed after episode four. A guest character who appeared in that episode stated that a timeline in which mankind was born wasn't supposed to exist. What people had taken for a relaxing educational show suddenly showed its heady sci-fi cards, and viewers got hooked on the concept. A group of them started doing deep reads on the show, calling themselves the Lore-Hunters.

Youko's social media accounts got caught up in the wave. Youko hated being behind on these things, so she caught herself up by finding the second and third

episodes online somewhere and pirating the hell out of them. Ratings shot up with each new episode. It became quite a Cinderella story for the little studio making the show. The contrast between the pastoral mood and the sci-fi underpinnings was the secret to their success.

And then the last episode aired. Youko found tears flowing down her cheeks. Afterwards, she felt an emptiness spreading through her. Loads of people online were describing similar symptoms. A feeling of loss, like the end of *Evo Gals* had taken a piece of their hearts with it. People started calling it the Evo Loss.

Fortunately, there was a way to recover from Evo Loss. *Evo Gals* was based on a mobile game of the same name. Youko installed it immediately. This was her fatal error.

The *Evo Gals* mobile game had a somewhat unusual system. Genre-wise, it was a mash-up of a rhythm game, a dress-up game, and an adventure game. Your standard mobile rhythm game involved customizing characters, forming parties, and playing the rhythm game with that party. *Evo Gals* added a fashion system to that basic gameplay. You could design entire outfits for the characters. Naturally, this wasn't just a cosmetic change; the clothes had practical effects, too. Characters and clothes had four core stats — cool, cheer, purity, and passion — and the different rhythm game stages had attributes, and compatibilities with these stats. Scores were based not just on the skill of the player, but on the character level and rarity, compatibility with the stage attributes, and the rarity and attributes of their outfits.

This was not a simple system. Rarity was important, but even if you put all your rarest pieces on a character, if the resulting outfit clashed or was wrong for the character wearing it, you might not get the results you wanted. The game required a genuine eye for fashion.

Evo Gals had hit ten million downloads a month after launch, smashing previous records. The system felt fresh, proved very popular, and earned it five-star reviews across the board.

Evo Gals was a free to play game. Naturally, that meant free to download; to obtain a lot of characters and clothes meant paying the game company a lot of

money, *i.e.* whaling. For the first two weeks she played the game, Youko didn't spend any money on it. She was more the no in-game purchase type, and it didn't even occur to her that she could spend money on it. But then one day she opened Pandora's box.

Evo Gals' rhythm game had both a Ranked Mode and an Adventure Mode. Adventure Mode involved a story that progressed by clearing stages, while Ranked Mode let you replay songs and compete for high scores with other players.

As she progressed through Adventure Mode, Youko hit a stage she just couldn't clear. The stage was based on the Late Permian Period, one of the prehistorical geological ages. The characters she had in her party seemed ready for the stage. They weren't that rare, but they were pretty high level.

She checked a FAQ online and learned something that surprised her. If you didn't have the special skill "Resist Low Oxygen," your score on the Late Permian Period stage would drop like a stone. To obtain the special skill, she needed a character that came with the skill, or a piece of clothing that granted that skill to the wearer. But all the Girls Youko had were unable to survive in low oxygen conditions.

Youko made up her mind to spend some money so she could progress. To get more characters, you had to spend money on the gacha. A gacha is a common game system where you exchange in-game points for random characters and items. The random factor is key. Players have to pull from the gacha over and over until the character they need pops out. If they do, the production company makes bank. Whoever invented this system was a genius.

Evo Gals had three types of gacha. The normal outfit gacha, the premium outfit gacha, and the Girls gacha. The normal outfit gacha gave low rarity clothes and the premium outfit gacha gave high rarity clothes, but the Girls gacha gave out characters. Pulling from the normal outfit gacha wasn't that hard. You could use the Hourglass points from events or level ups to pull it quite often. But pulling from the premium gacha or the Girls gacha was much harder. You had to use special points called "Infinite Hourglass" to pull from them. Ways to obtain Infinite Hourglass points were much more limited than regular Hourglass points. When you first started playing, they'd give you some as your

daily login bonus, but the rate at which you received them gradually slowed down until you had to login every day for an entire month to get any. Infinite Hourglass points were also handed out during special events or to make up for server outages on the admin side, but the fastest way to get some was to whale. You exchanged real world money for points that let you pull the gacha in the game world. Whatever, she thought, it'll be fine. It cost about 500 yen to pull once from the Girls gacha. That was the price of a fast food meal. Not exactly breaking the bank. No big deal.

Youko made her purchase without worrying about it. She had money saved. She'd only graduated and gotten a proper job a year ago, but none of her hobbies cost money, and all she did on her days off was lie around and watch anime, so she'd put a decent amount away. Here she was with a job and money. She'd wanted a chance to use the power those things gave her but hadn't found the right opportunity. This was the perfect chance.

When she pulled from the Girls gacha, the character she got was Meganeura-chan. Based on a giant 70 cm-long dragonfly that had lived in the Carboniferous period, the design featured a girl wearing glasses, a rather lame play on 'megane', the Japanese word for glasses. She was 'rare', which might seem valuable, but that was actually the second lowest rarity. *Evo Gals* character cards came in six types: Normal (N), Rare (R), Super Rare (SR), Ultra Rare (UR), Legendary Rare (LR) and God Rare (GR). It was only worth celebrating from at least Super Rare. Unfortunately, Meganeura-chan was also not good in low oxygen conditions. The Carboniferous Period was a time in Earth's history with above average oxygen.

Whatever. First tries always ended up that way. She'd just pull a second time. She tapped her phone, and another 500 yen were automatically withdrawn from Youko's bank account and installed on her phone's screen. What appeared was an illustration like a pile of unraveled springs. It said, "Protein." A miss. She'd got nothing, just a material item she could use to level up!

"Arghhh!" Youko yelled. This result pissed her off, but rather than quit, she started pulling faster. 1000 yen, 2000 yen, 3000 yen. Gradually increasing the amount she spent at one time. Before she realized it, she'd dropped 10,000 yen on the game. In the end, out of twenty pulls, she ended up with 15 proteins, 4

Normal, and just that one Rare. And no characters who resisted low oxygen.

“Why!? Whyyyyy!?” Her voice rasped. She’d thought it would all work out if she just spent money.

Then Youko noticed the words ‘100-pull gacha’ in the corner of the screen. Apparently, if you pulled 100 times at once, you were guaranteed at least 5 Super Rares. Score! And it was a limited time offer. If she spent 50,000 yen, she’d automatically get five SR characters for free. She had to pull. No other choice was even possible.

This is how Youko’s spendthrift mobile game life began. *Evo Gals* had more modes than just Adventure Mode. There was also Ranking Mode, where you tested your strength against players from all across the country. And by strength, it meant how much money you’d spent. No matter how well you played, if your party were all N, your score would be tragic. Youko had whaled pretty hard, so even as a new player she landed in the top 20,000. Given the ten million total players, that felt great. Something to be proud of.

Beyond the rhythm game was a function that let you use the characters as models. It consisted of designing outfits to fit a theme and putting your Girls on stage. You could get Likes from other players, and if you scored well, you would get high rarity clothes as a prize.

Youko kept spending money. Getting high rarity cards only made her want to spend more money. This was because if you got the same card twice, you could Evolve them into a stronger character. Additionally, there were skills that only activated if you had a complete set of the same type of clothing. Clothing items came in five types — tops, bottoms, inners, outers, and accessories. If you weren’t wearing all five of the same type, the skills wouldn’t work. The more she pulled from the gacha, the higher she climbed, and the more money she needed to spend. To justify the cost of what she’d already paid, she had to keep spending more.

A month after starting *Evo Gals*, Youko saw her credit card bill, and she was astonished. 600,000 yen had vanished into thin air. Of course, she’d spent it all on *Evo Gals*. This was clearly far too much. Her savings were for the future, not something to allow her to change the drawings on the screen of her phone.

Youko was filled with regret. “You fool! You’re a total idiot!” she cried, punching herself in the head. She resolved to spend as little as possible and go back to f2p.

Despite Youko’s regrets, it never crossed her mind that she should quit *Evo Gals*.

Evo Gals was the source of approval she’d been craving for some time. It occupied a critical place in her identity. She’d always been the type who really worried about what people thought, and thus people rarely thought of her at all. She was starving for validation and *Evo Gals* was a safe way to earn that validation. Plus, it came in the form of easy to interpret numbers. Her place in the rankings, the number of Likes... And even without her need for approval, parting with all the Girls she’d gathered would simply be awful. All these characters, with their prehistoric names like Dickinsonia-chan, Anomalocaris-chan, Convexicaris-chan, Bandringa-chan, Arthropleura-chan... Out of all of them her favorite had to be Yunnanozoon-chan. This was a character that could probably be classified as tsundere. She tried to make herself look strong, but there was always something lonely about her. In college, Youko had spent a lot of time with girls like that. You know, the type of girl who was too awkward to join the cliques and had never really made any friends. Youko wasn’t the most outgoing girl, but she was good at drawing out girls who were even more socially outcast than she was. Once girls like that opened up, they all became really reliant on Youko. Part of the reason she was still playing *Evo Gals* was because she missed that kind of validation. Quitting *Evo Gals* felt like abandoning a part of herself. Youko simply wasn’t decisive enough to do that.

Players who didn’t whale could only improve their ranks by pouring time into the game. To play the game, you needed points called stamina. Stamina gradually recovered over time but would never go over a certain maximum value. To maximize returns from the stamina regeneration, you had to start the rhythm game at the exact moment it hit that maximum value. If you let time pass beyond that, then the stamina you could have recovered during that time was lost. Stamina would recover fully in approximately two and a half hours. In other words, she absolutely had to play the game at least every two and a half hours. That was fine. Youko was totally prepared to set her schedule to the

demands of *Evo Gals*. The problem was that she was gainfully employed. It was a long time since college, when she'd had all the time in the world. The bulk of every weekday was not hers to use as she pleased.

Youko was not about to give up so easily. Even at work, she persevered, finding ways to keep up with the game through trial and error. First, she memorized the rhythm game's songs. It wasn't enough to know them in her mind. She had to hammer them home to such a degree her fingers would move reflexively. So much so that all she had to do was put her fingers on the screen and her fingers would move on their own. Her hard work paid off, and Youko got so she could clear hard mode without looking at the screen.

She activated this technique during meetings. However boring they might be, she had to pay close attention, so by resting her phone on her knees and letting her hands do their thing, oh, how strange, suddenly it didn't seem like such a waste of time. Time spent off-site was also critical. Who cared if her performance evaluation dropped as long as her game rank rose?

At lunch, Youko had to take special care not to run into any colleagues. If she did, she'd be forced to talk to them. She couldn't exactly ignore the person sitting opposite her and talk to her in favor of tapping on her phone. At this point in time, Youko still maintained baseline societal standards.

After work, she was finally free. This was where Youko's real job began. It went all night. Youko had no time for sleep. A restful six-hour slumber was a luxury she could not afford. She set an alarm to go off every two and a half hours so she could tap on her phone some more. She was always sleepy. But she powered through. All so she could get Ultra Rares, Legendary Rares, and God Rares. The characters' faces filled her dreams. Oh! Look! That's the fabled God Rare! Only a 0.005% chance of pulling one! To think they really existed... Wait! Wait, please! Don't leave me here... The next thing she knew she was tapping on her phone, still half-asleep. She could hear sparrows and crows outside. It was time for work. Right, got to get through another day.

Living like this was not sustainable. She started making mistakes. Typing in the wrong numbers, forgetting to contact the right people. All common enough mistakes, but as they stacked up, the rate at which people glared at her was steadily rising. Then one day she made a fatal mistake. She was in the café at

lunch, playing her game. She'd turned texts and calls off so she could concentrate. That day, the game had gifted players a bunch of stamina recovery items to make up for an operational issue. And she got a level up at just the right time, which refilled her stamina and allowed her to play continuously without running out. She played for such a long time that the next thing she knew it was already evening. She glanced at her call history and found a bunch of missed calls from her boss. The stress felt like stomach acid trying to melt her entire body. No matter how many times she bowed her head, the trust she'd lost would never return.

Despite all her hard work, Youko's rank began to drop. She did the events, but the SR prizes were out of reach. Sheer time spent couldn't make up for money spent. Youko made up her mind to whale again. For her own health. She couldn't make up for lost time, but she could get the money back eventually. It was better to waste the money she earned than ruin her life wasting time. A string of similar rationalizations led to her gradually increasing her expenditures. And the result was that she spent even more time playing. Of course it did. She could spend money to refill stamina, so she didn't need to waste any time waiting for stamina to refill. The more time she spent on an event, the higher her ranking, and the better the prize cards she got.

Youko's deck became filled with rare cards. Dozens of SR, a dozen UR, a number of LR. But her appetites were never satisfied. She never found a finish line. The more she gathered, the more new cards she got. And these cards seemed very attractive. She wanted them all. She wanted them more than anything. To satisfy these urges, she tore through all her money, pulling on that gacha. But once she got the card she was after, she just found another one to crave.

There were event-limited cards, too. If you didn't reach the top ranks of a time-limited event you would never be able to get them. They were a race to see who could devote themselves to the event the most. To see who could sacrifice themselves more than others. It was a fight to show your love. How much love — money and time — could you squeeze out?

Before she knew it, she hadn't gone to work in a week. It was the strangest thing. The number on the calendar had gone up by seven without her noticing.

Her list of calls and texts had filled up, but that had nothing to do with the game, so she never bothered looking. Her room was filled with empty drink bottles and convenience store meals. She hadn't taken a bath, so her body was starting to reek. How much had she spent? Probably about a million yen that week alone. But she had 1.5 million saved so she was still fine.

It was about time for her one daily meal. Youko no longer felt hunger. She felt a strange detachment, like she was looking at herself from a step outside her body. She knew she was hungry, but that didn't seem urgent — it was simply one more piece of objective data. And not particularly accurate data, at that. Sometimes she lost track of the condition of her stomach altogether and only realized she hadn't eaten anything after passing out for a while.

Still tapping her phone, she stood up and went outside. Her right thumb kept the phone balanced, her four fingers tapping the icons just as they appeared. She used her left hand to open the door. The light was blinding, and the sun was nearing the horizon. She wasn't sure if it was morning or evening. She didn't know which direction was which. Either way, she just had to get to the convenience store to buy water and food.

It was a five-minute walk from her home to the store, but Youko never once took her hand off her phone the whole way. She was right in the middle of an event. A single point difference might decide the value of the cards she earned. That thought made the very idea of placing her phone out of eyesight unbearable. By this point it was a part of Youko's nervous system.

Her feet knew the way to the store. She didn't need to look up. She took the elevator to the ground floor, turned right, and walked to the corner. She didn't need to check the signal. If there were cars coming, she'd hear them. It wasn't a busy intersection, anyway.

This conviction proved her undoing.

A six-ton truck coming from the blind spot to her right ended Youko's life. What a foolish life it had been. So addicted to a mobile game she'd ended up dying because of it. And the biggest irony was that the data she'd devoted her life to was gone. The overwhelming pressure from the six-ton truck's tires had smashed her phone to pieces. Not just the phone; they'd smashed Youko's

spine, too. Fortunately, she died instantly. The impact stretched her cerebral nerves, and most of them snapped. If she'd survived that, she certainly would have been in so much pain she'd have been begging to be put out of her misery. It was a stroke of luck that she died before that pain arrived. It wasn't every day a blessing like that came along. A painless death was the greatest treasure of all.

II

In the instant before her death, Youko experienced a wave of alienation. As one nerve after another snapped, her connections to the real world melted away. The brain she'd used for twenty-four years was being destroyed. The most important evidence she had that she was herself, was ground to pulp. She was cut off, cast out of the world. It felt like everything in the world was screaming that her existence had no value.

Before the pain signals reached her, Youko was dead. But a strange sensation hit her instead. Like she was falling... no, rising? It was an unstable feeling, like the ground had vanished. This wasn't anything as simple as floating through the air because a truck had hit her. She was falling or rising in some entirely unfamiliar direction. The sensation assaulted her from all directions, like it was trying to crush her. Like an orange in a clenched fist, Youko burst!

Falling... Falling... Falling... Thrown out of the world she'd always known. If she compared it to a human experience, the thing it most resembled was the moment of birth. Being launched into 100% pure unknown.

But at the end of it was something familiar. Like a long-since forgotten friend or a TV show once watched, her sense of self developed. *Something* familiar was approaching — something from beyond her memories, beyond her own existence. What a relief! She felt as secure — no, more secure than she had when she was still part of the world.

Then, out of nowhere, loss! Youko was falling again. The familiar sensation vanished. Never to return. Oh, no! No! No! She wailed and screamed but to no avail. All that remained was a sad hollow. Nothing else. No other sensations. No touch, no temperature, no wind, nothing else around her. Like standing in a world without light in lukewarm water the same temperature as her body. She was frustrated, but this did not make her pulse race, did not make her sweat. She tried to scream but no voice emerged. She had no tongue or throat or voice box, so how could it?

She was lonely! Why was she so lonely? Because she was alone. Fundamentally alone. Nobody else even existed here. Youko was all alone in a world that seemed to go on forever. She had lost her body, the one thing closest to her. In a world without anyone to interact with, she wasn't anyone at all.

Youko remembered when she'd first graduated and entered the workforce. She had found herself somewhere where she didn't know anyone. A place without anyone around to define herself by. If she took that experience and multiplied it by a quintillion she might get something like what she was experiencing now.

Someone. She needed to find someone else. Someone in this place besides herself. She knew there wasn't anyone. She knew her efforts were futile. But she had to find someone, so that she could interact with the world again.

And she found something. Extremely faint traces of someone. Someone's shadow. Someone's breath.

It was hard to describe. Youko had no sight, so she couldn't see what they looked like. At most, she could sense their presence. Like when you sense someone standing behind you, except she felt something similar in front of her.

The presence spoke. "Pull," it said.

Pull? What did that mean? The only association Youko had with that word was the gacha. Oh, that made sense. The presence she felt was a gacha. Thinking about it, it seemed obvious. The thing that defined her was a mobile game! All she had to do was pull from the gacha, and she could be someone.

This understanding allowed her to see. Her eyes focused, like waking from a dreamless slumber. Before her eyes was an icon, one that looked like Earth. It was the normal outfit gacha icon she'd seen constantly playing *Evo Gals* when she was alive. The words "11-pull gacha" hovered over the Earth. Youko reached out her finger. She had no finger, but just like touching the screen of her phone, a set of cards appeared, backs to her.

The first card flipped. Drawn on it was not a cute boy or girl, not a cool man or woman, nor a terrifying monster, but a familiar illustration from the biology textbook she'd used in high school. At the edge of the card was written the

following:

N: Nucleus

Youko became something. Something with a nucleus. The system worked just like *Evo Gals*. But instead of the Girls from the title, the character was Youko herself.

This was a game that involved making outfits of flesh to dress up her soul.

The second card started to turn. Once again, a very unappealing illustration. Just a bunch of little grey spheres gathered into a tube. She glanced at the letters, and saw the rarity was Normal once again.

N: Microtubule

Tiny fibers appeared inside Youko's cell. They strengthened the borders that gave her cell shape.

She hit the skip button to flip the rest of the cards.

N: Chitin

N: Phagosome

N: Mitochondrion

N: Cellular Membrane

N: Protein Complex Set

R: Lamellipodium

N: Chemoreceptor

N: Microtubule

N: Chitin

Mostly Normals, but that's what the normal outfit gacha gave out.

The cards became part of Youko's soul, giving her an interface to interact with the world around her. In the most fundamental sense, *something else* made Youko into something. They established Youko's identity. What was Youko? A shapeless translucent slimy wriggling fluid. A microscopic organism that could change shape freely, wriggling, widening, spreading, becoming bulbous. She'd

seen this sort of thing through a microscope in science class. She was an amoeba.

She'd been reincarnated as an Amoeba Girl.

Now that she was an amoeba, Youko had thought she'd be able to see again. This had been foolish. She remained trapped in darkness.

Youko didn't have any eyes. In fact, she didn't even have any nerve cells capable of perceiving light. All she had were chemoreceptors capable of detecting nutrient density. With no nerve cells, she shouldn't have been able to think, either, but Youko did seem to have retained her consciousness. She could talk to herself. What was up with that? If reincarnation was possible, then maybe it wasn't that weird to think without a brain. It definitely seemed like the soul existed, at any rate.

Unfortunately, Youko's consciousness had trouble controlling her body. If she turned her mind towards it, its simplistic world view overpowered her, making it impossible to perform any complex movements. All she could really do was respond to the chemoreceptor's input. She'd been hoping to live a comfortable amoeba life, benefiting from her previous life as a human, but that wasn't really working out.

Amoebas lived simple lives. They reached out with their pseudopodia, and if they came in contact with bacteria or algae, they surrounded them, brought them inside themselves with phagosomes, and assimilated them as nutrition. If you asked Youko what that felt like, she'd have had trouble telling you. She had no sense of touch or taste.

Every now and then she thought she heard a voice, like little voiceless shrieks coming from the tiny bacteria her pseudopodia caught. It felt like there were people in the bacteria. Were there other Girls besides her? Maybe other Girls had pulled bacteria or algae cards. She didn't know for sure, but when she heard screams during her meals it was far more satisfying. She had no taste buds to tell her if the food was good. She just got a satisfied feeling. The closest point of comparison she had was when getting points for free when playing *Evo Gals*. So Youko started calling the hypothetical beings that gave her this

sensation ‘points’.

It seemed like she could get ‘points’ not only from other creatures; they also spontaneously developed inside her. Exactly like a mobile game’s points. The same way you could get points just for logging in every day.

As time passed, she built enough points that they started demonstrating a strange power. They pointed Youko in a certain direction, pulling her in that direction like a magnet. Youko was sure of it. That must be where the premium gacha was. If there was a normal gacha, there was no way they didn’t have a premium one. This truth was self-evident.

Youko could hardly be satisfied with her current state. She wanted to be something more. Not some amoeba, something that didn’t matter if it existed or not. She had to become a more impressive Girl. And the only way to do that was to pull from the premium gacha.

Wriggling herself, she advanced in the direction the points indicated using peristaltic movement. She couldn’t see, but she knew she was headed towards the gacha. A primal urge she could not resist filled Youko’s body. It felt like when she woke up in the morning and immediately grabbed her phone to launch the game. The gacha taxis.

As Youko pressed onwards urgently, something suddenly felt wrong. It was a very unpleasant sensation. The flesh in contact with the world was sending warnings to her with all its might. Some sort of danger was approaching!

Youko yanked in her outstretched pseudopodia. This was a wise decision. A large multicellular organism was camped in front of her. Ten or more cells clustered together, cilia stretching out of each to rake in the prey in the water around.

“Tch! You there! Hand over your points or else!”

“You can talk?” Youko thought, surprised, but she was delighted to have finally met an actual thing at last. With no mouth or voice or brain, how could she talk? Youko spoke to this new organism directly from her soul. Much like telepathy.

“Course I can talk. I’m a Girl. So are you. Got it? Now gimme them points!” It

might not be saying 'Girl' or 'points' specifically, but Youko understood what it was trying to say. It wanted the things Youko had decided to call points.

The multicellular organism thrust a cilium in Youko's direction. She dodged at the last second, taking full advantage of her body's flexibility. Of course, both of them were microscopic, so this was an exceedingly small-scale fight.

Youko didn't know how big her enemy was, or what it looked like. She just sensed an overwhelming need to run away.

"You want my points! Take them, they're yours! Just let me go!" To hell with shame or reputation. If she'd been physically capable of getting down on her hands and knees she already would be.

"Sorry, but the only way to transfer points is to eat you. Stay still and let me chow down!"

It did not seem like diplomacy was an option. She'd have to think of another way to escape this peril. Did she have any useful abilities? Her phagosomes would not serve as weapons. Since she had to surround her prey, she had no way of processing anything bigger than herself. If the cards she had now wouldn't do the trick, she had to level up. In your average mobile game, fusing multiples of the same card would give you new cards with higher stats. Maybe this world worked the same way. That was her only chance.

Youko prayed, "Two Microtubules, fuse! Two Chitins, fuse!"

N: Microtubules fused! Evolved to R: Cilium

N: Chitin fused! Evolved to R: Shell

Good! Combining identical cards did actually evolve them.

Youko's body was now covered with a hard chitin shell. Her flowing soft body fit inside of it. She had cilia sticking out of the holes in the shell, allowing her to suck organic matter in.

A moment after her transformation, the multicellular organism swallowed Youko. Its phagosomes secreted digestive enzymes, but with her new chitin shell, these were unable to dissolve Youko.

"Yo, yo, what? What you doing inside my cells? You're nasty!"

“You’re the one who ate me!” Youko wasn’t about to stand for that.

“Oh, right. So I guess I win? That shell of yours won’t last long. Tough break!”

“Yeah? I think you’re the one facing a tough break.”

Youko extended her cilia, stabbing the cell membrane. The nucleus was only protected by lipids, and her hardened cilia could easily get inside. She was after the genes. The root of all physical information, the common weak point of all species. If she could damage the genes, the cell was as good as dead. Even if it appeared to be doing just fine on the surface, without that genetic information it would stop functioning in a few hours.

“Huh? You just destroyed my genes?”

“Yup!”

“Huh. I’m a multicellular organism! One ruined cell doesn’t even faze me! I’m still gonna eat you!”

“Go right ahead and try. I’ll just destroy more of your genes!”

It could eat Youko, but that would lead to it sustaining fatal damage. Calling this a draw was the best strategy for both parties. Her opponent finally seemed to realize that, so Youko released the ruined cell and left. As she went, her enemy yelled after her.

“OK, I’ll let you go this time! But I’ll pay you back someday! My name’s Dyaus! Don’t you forget it!”

Dyaus left, and Youko happily took what was left behind. She ate the still living cell from the inside. It tasted like nothing, but it satisfied her. She could tell there had been points inside. Her pile of points was whetting Youko’s appetite. Her consciousness was filled with one thought alone. The gacha. She needed to pull. Wriggling her body, she crossed mountains and valleys, headed for the gacha of her dreams.

She could feel that familiar sensation coming from up ahead. It felt much more valuable than the gacha she’d used during reincarnation. She was sure it was the premium gacha.

Even though she had no eyes, it felt like her vision was broadening. This

sensation hadn't appeared out of nowhere. It was more like it had always been there and Youko simply hadn't noticed.

Youko released the points within her, placing them in the gacha. She felt embarrassed and yet free, as if she was now naked. It felt like even her skin had been stripped off.

But even with all her points in it, she couldn't pull from the gacha. She didn't have enough. It was like she heard a voice telling her to whale. She wasn't sure if it was the gacha talking or a voice inside her.

Whale? But Youko was flat broke. She couldn't very well spend money she didn't have. It didn't even seem like this world had a currency system.

But then a button floated into Youko's mind that said, "Purchase Points." It was like seeing a particularly vivid dream while still wide awake. Normally, dreams were unstable things, soon flitting off to some other association, but this button stayed firm, maintaining its shape. In fact, it seemed to be getting steadily more real to her.

What would happen if she pressed the button? It would clearly extract some sort of payment. Youko had spent a year supporting herself in the real world, and she knew just how tough life could be. She hesitated for a moment but felt like she had no choice but to press the button. A single press would hardly have fatal consequences. She might as well give it a shot.

The moment she made up her mind, it happened. A part of herself was torn out, leaving her thinner than before. A wave of exhaustion hit her. Not physical exhaustion, but mental exhaustion. The kind of fatigue that comes from doing the same thing over and over and over again. Like what she was doing wasn't even any fun any more but she was too addicted to stop herself. She felt afraid and yet apathetic, like she was just responding robotically to the inputs she was given.

What the? What was this? A moment later, warmth returned to her heart. Points. She'd been given points.

Whaling. That was the cause. She'd paid a price far more dangerous than she'd imagined. To test it she hit the button one more time. Oof, this was definitely bad. It felt like she'd died. She was sure she was sacrificing part of her

lifespan. Come to think of it, the gacha was warning her about this. It was written right on it. “Warning: Purchases may have a negative impact on your health, lifespan, volition, and existence.”

But warnings like this were lost on Youko. She was a mobile game junkie. In her last life she’d worked herself to the bone earning money only to blow it all on the gacha, heedless of the psychological toll. Negative influences on her health, lifespan, volition, and existence weren’t no thing.

At any rate, she’d obtained enough points to pull from the gacha a few times. She may have significantly shortened her lifespan, but a strong start was critical in any mobile game. If you didn’t spend money right off the bat and get some high rarity cards, you’d just increase the time you wasted. It might seem foolish, but it was a practical choice! Rationalizing her actions real hard, Youko pulled that gacha.

Jing-a-ling-a-ling-a-liiiiing! A fanfare played. Music only played for SR or above. Now this was the premium gacha! This exultation! No normal card could ever provide it. The card’s illustration appeared in Youko’s heart.

SR: Multicellularity

When she equipped the card, a rift ran down her body, and she split in two. Two became four and four became six. The extra cells were encased in a larger cellular membrane. This was good. This body would let her fight Dyaus on even ground.

She put points in again. Unfortunately, this time there was no fanfare. Just a Rare.

R: Extrusome

An illustration of a round monochromatic thing with more round things inside. This did not help clarify what sort of function it might serve. Most mobile games would have explanations, but this world was not that generous. Oh well. She’d just have to equip it and see.

She equipped the card and a change occurred near the roots of her cilia. The cytoplasm writhed, generating countless little hollows. She didn’t know what those were, but they didn’t seem harmful. Maybe they’d be useful later. She let

them be.

She pulled from the gacha a third time. Another fanfare. Excited, she flipped the card, only to be disappointed.

SR: Multicellularity

This again? Getting herself that many extra cells didn't really seem all that useful.

The fourth pull was the big score. Getting a card like this early was a huge win.

SR: Explanations

This card added functionality to the cards themselves. It was a meta card. Like the name suggested, this card must add explanations to the other cards. This was something she'd definitely wanted. And it was a passive skill that would work without being equipped. There were explanations on her other cards already.

To test this out, she took a look at that Extrusome card again.

Extrusome: A membrane-bound structure located just below the surface of a cell. In response to certain stimuli, they discharge their contents to the cell's exterior.

Was that it? What the hell was that good for?

Youko spent what felt like a few days doing this. She'd pull from the gacha, gather points, and pull from the gacha again. It was an unglamorous life compared to her previous one. She could get points from any old algae or bacteria or really anything living around her. Sometimes she sensed a presence like herself within the organisms, but when she spoke to them they never answered. Had they originally had minds, but their souls had been long since eroded by their bodies? If you remained in this primitive body without pulling on the gacha maybe your mind would slowly diminish to the level of your body. She was lucky. If she'd picked her lifespan over the gacha, she'd have lost the last trace of her humanity.

Youko's body was changing with incredible speed. The biggest change came

when she got the SR card Segmentation. This card appeared after she'd leveled up her multicellularity cards and fused them. Segmentation allowed the creation of segmented structures of similar cells. By enlarging these stable constructions, she could easily make herself larger. And the segments allowed for redundancy. Even if she lost one segment, as long as she had another segment performing the same function, the damage wouldn't be fatal. And she could easily grow another segment.

Youko now looked like a caterpillar. She had a number of units connected in a row with cilia sticking out everywhere, and she was crawling through the mud on the sea floor using peristaltic movements. She tried covering her entire body with a shell to increase her defense, but this was a waste of time. Her body was simply too big and having the shell over it made it hard for oxygen to flow and she nearly suffocated. Clearly, the cards she put together had hidden compatibilities. Just throwing all your strong cards on may not actually make you stronger. For the same reason, it seemed like you couldn't just make yourself infinitely larger.

What she needed was respiratory organs. There was a limit to how much oxygen she could absorb through her exterior, like she'd been doing. Her total size was her length cubed, but her surface area was only her length squared. If she could only absorb oxygen through the surface, the oxygen needed by the interior cells would never reach them, and they'd perish.

At times like this, it would be nice to have a specialized gacha. In mobile games it was quite common to have limited time gacha that would give cards of a particular affinity. If only there was a respiratory gacha.

Youko expanded her territory, centering it on the gacha she always pulled. The gacha was like an oasis to the Girls. It granted them blessings, yet it was also a battle arena. Anytime multiple Girls gathered together, they'd inevitably start trying to steal each other's points. The area around the gacha was littered with corpses. Youko used that to her advantage. She'd hide herself in the mud and use her chemoreceptors to tell her when the fighting had subsided. Once the victor had swum away, she'd pop out of the mud and scavenge the leftovers. There were points in those corpses — not a lot, but every bit helped.

By what felt like two weeks since she'd become a Girl, Youko finally got the sight she'd been hoping for. R: Photoreceptors. These were cells scattered across her surface cells that could only detect light and dark, but that was surprisingly useful. Her chemoreceptors were useless anywhere with a current, but light was a versatile sensory medium that could be used under any conditions.

When she leveled her photoreceptors up, she got eyespots — clusters of photoreceptive cells. By making segments of eyespots she was able to get compound eyes containing a number of small eyes. Now she could at last see the view around her.

Sight. This was absolutely revolutionary. Light was the fastest thing in the world. Being able to perceive that light meant grasping the situation before anyone else. All this time she'd only had a rough idea of her world based on changes to chemical density, but now a world of comparatively stunning clarity surrounded her. Trapped within her soul, Youko had been feeling claustrophobic, so she rejoiced at this new freedom.

Sight made exploring easier, too. Youko attached two eyes to the top of her head. She'd crawl along in the mud, her eyes stretched out, observing the world above her. If she saw a large shadow she'd hide in the dirt.

There were a lot of gacha around, in surprising places. She could feel when she was getting closer to a gacha, but she needed to be a certain distance away to sense them, so the only way to find them was to explore. She never found a respiratory gacha, but she managed to finish a respiratory system with some unexpected cards. Feet. Feet were a versatile part that could be branched off into all kinds of organs. The first type Youko got was R: Parapodium. A pair of parapodia sticking out of every segment on her body. They might look like just a bunch of bumps, but they were so much more. By undulating a body with these bumps, she could generate friction to move herself around far faster than before. When she leveled up her parapodia and fused them, she got SR: Phyllopod Feet, which took the parapodia nubs, made them bigger and thinner, and then covered them with more nubs. This generated more friction, making it easier to get around.

She could specialize her legs per body segment. For example, by

concentrating sensory organs in the legs by her head they became feelers, while a number of legs near the front of her became gills. She called them gills, but they were of extremely simple construction. She just extended several layers of flimsy flesh and folded them several times like origami. Then she concentrated capillaries inside them and let cutaneous respiration do its thing. The folded sections increased the overall surface area, allowing her to absorb sufficient oxygen.

Now that she could obtain oxygen efficiently, she could be far more active. Instead of just hiding in the mud, Youko could leap out of it, ambushing other Girls and tearing away pieces of their bodies. To increase her offensive capabilities, she changed two legs into mandibles. By raising the mandibles' level, they became bigger and thicker. Since she had gills now, she could also cover her entire body with a tough chitin shell.

Youko's build was becoming formidable. Describing it in terms familiar from her previous life, she looked like a mukade combined with a stag beetle combined with a slug. Her body was made of sturdy, flat, jointed segments, with a pair of soft phyllopod feet sticking out of each segment. Near the front, these feet became longer and more complex, and at the very front they were like a forest growing in all directions. Where the gills were, the bluish color of her blood showed through. A closer look at the gills revealed countless cilia pulsing constantly. On her head were two eye stalks with compound eyes at the tips, twitching this way and that. Just outside the eye stalks were two serrated feelers. But her ultimate trademark were the two massive mandibles, a third of her total body length. There were two joints in each, allowing her to slice like a pair of scissors or stab like a fork. The inside was lined with sharp spikes, and nothing these pierced got off lightly.

Youko had become a dominant force in her area. She was no longer a bottom-tier Girl. This was it. This was the sensation she'd been craving — the feeling that someone acknowledged her, recognized her. It was the sensation that kept her playing mobile games — the satiation of her need for approval.

It felt wonderful. Everyone was looking at her. At last she felt like she had real value.

One day, something happened that did an even better job scratching this itch.

“Yo! You’re Youko, right? You remember me?”

Just hearing the voice echoing in her soul was enough to annoy her. It was the voice of a Girl who’d been stalking her for a while now. She’d know that condescending tone anywhere. It was Dyaus. They’d tried to kill each other once.

“Dyaus! Here for a rematch? I’ll take you on whenever!”

All this approval she was riding had Youko getting a little carried away. She was confident in the body she’d built, but Dyaus had clearly not been slacking off in that department. Like Youko, she was a segmented invertebrate, but rather than scrabbling through the dirt, she could swim. The overall impression was very fish-like. She was teardrop-shaped, like a cicada, with the head at the thicker end. Her head had eight eyes, like you often see on spiders. Two giant compound eyes covered nearly a third of her head, and six smaller eyes were arranged around them. Below her head was a mouth like a long, thin, horizontal vacuum cleaner. Around the mouth were a number of short feelers, like human fingers, presumably to help rip prey off the seafloor.

The legs on her sides had fins attached—long fins like airplane wings that let her wheel around in the water over Youko’s head, like a vulture. Meanwhile, the legs on her belly were feeble things. They probably still qualified as parapodia. She’d probably specialized her deck to allow for swimming. Behind the fins, Youko could see gill-like slots, and inside the slots she caught glimpses of blue string-like organs. The biggest threat was her tail. The further back you went the more keratinized it was, until it became a sharp blade. She must have used this sharp tail to stab her prey and claim their points.

How was she going to attack? Youko turned her mandibles in Dyaus’ direction, ready for a sudden assault. But it seemed the other Girl was not interested in that.

“Ha ha ha, lower your weapon. I ain’t here to fight you. Other way around. I’m calling a truce! What say you join us?”

“You think I can trust you? You attacked me last time.”

“You don’t believe me? I swear! Look me in the eye.”

“Those compound eyes don’t really tell me anything...”

“That’s fair. Well, if you can’t trust me, I’ll bring in someone to vouch for me.”

The light grew dim. Something huge was passing overhead. Dirt-clouds billowed up right next to where Youko was lurking. Feet. Four feet, each as large as Youko was wide, surrounded her. The feet weren’t keratinized — they were still taut and fleshy, like white rubber. They were cylindrical poles like elephant legs. White claws ripped their way out of the flesh’s surface.

The owner of these legs was a shadow overhead. A big one. At least eight times as big as Youko, like a flying saucer. That was the description that seemed most apt. It looked like something halfway between a shellfish and an octopus, with a disc-shaped shell on its head. Two large eyes bulged out of its sides. Not insect-like compound eyes, but lensed eyes, similar to a human’s. Below the disc was a mass of sensory hair. A number of cilia had grown real thick, forming antennae. The tips of the antennae grew broader, twitching like lures. There were slits in the center. Mouths? These antennae sometimes rubbed against the main mouth.

“Sounds like Dyaus didn’t make a great first impression. She does get a little carried away sometimes. Can I ask you to forgive her? My name is Ganapati. I promise you Dyaus is not a bad Girl.”

Ganapati spoke clearly. A cheery tone, with a gentle warmth. She seemed a thousand times more trustworthy than Dyaus.

“Well? Trust us now?” Dyaus asked.

No, no, she wasn’t trusting anyone here. She’d almost gone trotting after them, lured by the kindness in Ganapati’s tone, but at the last minute, sanity prevailed. A stranger vouching for a stranger meant nothing. She’d just get her head chomped off the second she let her guard down. That’s how society worked.

“Youko, it seems you’re unable to trust us. I don’t blame you. I’m sure you’ve had a rough time of it. But there’s more to *Evo Gals* than just killing each other. It’s also a game that reminds us how rewarding cooperating can be.”

Really? Her experience made that seem highly dubious.

“Ganapati, showing’s easier than telling.”

“Good point. Youko, I’m going to make a friend request. Please accept it.”

A window opened up inside Youko’s mind. “Friend request from Ganapati. Accept?” it said. Cautiously, Youko clicked, “Yes.”

“Now we’re friends. Next, I’ll send you a Like.”

What was a Like? Before she could ask, a change occurred in Youko’s soul.

Like! Like! Approval cravings fulfilled! She was famous! Everyone accepted her! What a wonderful feeling!

“Well? Amazing, right? This increases your points, too.”

Just as Ganapati said, her points had gone up. Not by a lot, but still.

“See? Now you understand the benefits of joining us.”

Youko asked if the three of them could get points just by sending each other Likes, but this was not the case.

“We gave it a shot, of course. No use. You can only send a friend one Like a day. That’s the rule.”

And so a new daily routine began. Point hunting became a cooperative effort between Youko, Dyaus, and Ganapati. Dyaus was the scout. She used her amazing fins to fly through the water, finding targets. Their strategy was to drive their prey over to where Ganapati and Youko were waiting in ambush. Youko was best suited for living in the mud, and great at hiding. Burying herself in the cold mud, only her eye stalks sticking out, her life was spent waiting for prey to wander into their trap. Before joining the other two, she’d had to actively hunt, but now all she had to do was wait, and the points would come rolling in. This was amazing. How could she even be any happier? This was the same kind of bliss you got playing one of those set-it-and-wait games where the units would go do the grinding for you.

This was the first time she’d been able to relax since reincarnating. The first time she hadn’t lived in fear of the unknown. She had others who’d respond to

the question of who she was. Even compared to her previous life, this was a fairly fortuitous situation. Compared to the days she'd done nothing but pull from gachas, Youko felt truly alive.

With all this extra time, Youko was able to think clearly. Not the confused, fractured, incoherent thoughts she'd had up to this point; now she could put her thoughts in order. The first thing she thought about was Dyaus. Why had she come to Youko with a friend request? The simplest answer was because Youko was strong. Youko had earned herself quite a reputation in these parts. When new-born beginners came crawling over to pull from the gacha, it was usually Youko that ate them. It made a lot of sense that Dyaus would admire her talent and seek to party up with her. But she was a proud Girl; it seemed unnatural for her to try and make friends with someone she'd once tried to kill. She might have ulterior motives. Youko had to stay on guard. When she spoke to Dyaus, she would have to remember to play her cards close to her chest.

Next, she thought about this world. What was this place, exactly? Had she been transported to another world? Or was this not real at all, just a long, long illusion created by her dying brain? If she really had been reborn in another world, it seemed likely it would work in a more realistic way. Meanwhile, if this was an illusion, why would she want a world in which she had to get body parts from a gacha and turn herself into some gross creature? Youko didn't think of herself as someone with that kind of imagination. Or was oxygen-deprivation something that sent the imagination into overdrive? That seemed unlikely.

Either way, mulling it over wasn't producing any real answers. Some problems couldn't be solved by thinking about them. If she wanted to know the truth about this world, she needed more information about it. And that meant things had to change. As long as she sat at the bottom of whatever ocean this was, she was the proverbial frog in a well. She had to expand her horizons.

While they ate that day, Youko told Dyaus and Ganapati about her plans to see the outside world.

"Oh? Sounds pretty sweet. Let's do this," Dyaus said, totally on board. "This place is comfy enough, but it's gettin' kinda old. And everything we eat is made of chitin! Could use some variety, you know?"

“I’m against it,” Ganapati said, gravely. “Why abandon a place of safety, and head out to the unknown? It isn’t logical.”

“Pfft! You’re such a bore, Ganapati. Right, Youko! Guess it’s just the two of us.”

Dyaus swam down by Youko and poked her back. This was dangerous and Youko wished she’d knock it off.

“Dyaus, why are you always like this?” Ganapati sighed. “Fine! I’d just be worried about you. I’ll come, too. But where are we headed?”

“Our ultimate goal should be dry land,” Youko said. She always found herself speaking more politely with Ganapati. “Right now, we can only breathe through gills, but maybe the gacha near land will have organs that making breathing air easier.”

“This seems very poorly planned.” It was unusual for Ganapati to phrase things this bluntly.

“That’s what makes it fun!” Dyaus said, clearly excited.

Their goal was set. But they still lacked the means to carry out the plan. What land should they head for? They couldn’t just search blindly. There was no map around. Even if they tried to make one, that would be really difficult without any paper. Their best bet was to go to the water’s surface and search for land. Dyaus was best suited to that mission. Youko and Ganapati were both designed for bottom dwelling, and it would be difficult for them to reach the surface. But Dyaus was a Girl able to swim freely in three dimensions.

Dyaus swam up and up. Catching the currents with her fins, she rode them higher and higher. The surface shouldn’t be that far away. After all, there was plenty of sunlight filtering down.

Dyaus had never left the water before. Without Youko, it would never have occurred to her to head for the surface. Once again, she was grateful Youko was there. Youko was a great Girl. As long as she was with them, they could have so much fun. Just thinking about all the adventures they were going to have got Dyaus excited. She had been so bored. Ganapati was a nice Girl, too, but not

exactly a thrilling companion.

The sparkling surface of the water was getting closer. The waves made white bubbles.

“Woohoo!”

She burst out of the surface, leaping through the air. Blue. Blue as far as the eye could see.

She spread her fins to the fullest, plunging back into the water. By spreading out the portion of herself in contact with the surface, she could distribute her weight, floating on the water. Strong sunlight pounded down, baking her body. It itched, like her surface was drying out, withering. She quickly looked around. There. A line crossing the blue. That was the land Youko spoke of.

Land had a lot to offer Girls. Giant Girls were reaching their arms to the heavens. Were they sunbathing? They seemed to be enjoying themselves. But land did not seem to be a paradise. Even Girls good at sunbathing could not escape this world’s struggle over points. There was an indirect war going on, a struggle to steal sunlight from each other. Girls were using giant mobile parasols to steal the sunlight their rivals were soaking in, Girls were encasing lighter air in membranes and floating themselves above their rivals to claim the sunlight first, and those who had their sunlight stolen were unable to sunbathe and perished. To escape death, some Girls made more direct attacks. Strangling each other with their feelers, shooting darts, ripping surface flesh open with claws and slurping up the juices, gathering light to start fires, consuming symbionts... The Girls were all fighting and without really knowing why. Without understanding why they had to feel such suffering.

Dyaus sensed none of this. She was no philosopher. All she thought when she saw land was that there were a lot of Girls there good at different things. The sun was drying out her gills and it hurt, so she dove back into the sea.

“I found land! You were right, Youko!”

Youko was relieved to hear Dyaus’ report. Land was closer than she thought. They could check the direction of the sun and know which way to go.

Dyaus surfaced two or three more times, making sure of their directions.

Fortunately, it was not a great distance away.

The three friends set off on their journey together. But each of them had a different means of propulsion, speed, and rate of exhaustion. Dyaus was the fastest, but only in ideal circumstances; she struggled when the currents were in flux. As they got closer to the land, the waves got bigger, and Dyaus struggled more. Those moments were Ganapati's chance to shine. Dyaus would lie face up under her belly, holding on with her feelers. Dyaus was frustrated by her inability to swim freely, but Ganapati seemed to enjoy it. It was hard to read her expression, but they'd been working together long enough that Youko could get a sense of her mood.

Youko was the least mobile of the three. Her mandibles and gills offered up considerable resistance, slowing her down. She considered changing up her cards to make movement easier, but blowing points leveling everything up again seemed like a waste, so she also took a ride on Ganapati's belly. Dyaus was thrilled to have a fellow passenger to talk to, but this seemed to make Ganapati grumpy, and she refused to join in the conversations. It was pretty awkward.

As they neared the land, there were more Girls around them. They were floating, swimming, crawling, and tunneling. Some fled when they saw the three of them coming, while others recklessly went up against them and were torn to pieces. They'd yet to find a threat that was a match for the three of them together.

The surface was quickly getting closer. The water was cloudy, and all the different chemical smells were making them dizzy. Branches washed down from the land were piled up, making a maze several layers deep. There were Girls lurking within the maze, too.

From this point on, even the three of them were forced to be cautious. The cloudy water limited their vision, and the chemicals rendered their sense of smell useless. The situation was extremely ripe for an ambush. Ganapati had the highest defenses, so the other two stayed underneath her, and they all moved slowly forward.

Then Youko heard a voice.

A voice in pain, calling out in desperation.

“Help... Somebody, please... Help me...”

Youko paused, looking around her. This was a voice speaking directly to her soul, the way Girls spoke to each other.

“Mm? What’s up, Youko?” Dyaus asked. Had she not heard the voice?

“Someone’s calling for help.”

“A voice? I didn’t hear nothing. Whatever, just ignore it! Prolly a trap, anyway. Better keep our distance.”

But Youko couldn’t simply ignore it. She wasn’t sure why. She just felt like she had to go towards the voice.

“It’s bugging me. I’m gonna go take a look,” Youko said, and started swimming towards the voice. It was in the maze of branches.

“Wait, Youko! It ain’t safe!” Dyaus tried to follow her into the branches but her fins were in the way and she couldn’t fit through.

“Dyaus, let us wait here for Youko to return,” Ganapati said, holding her back.

“But...”

Meanwhile, Youko was headed deeper and deeper into the maze, following the voice. It grew steadily stronger, and even more anguished.

“Help... It hurts... Please! Help me, Sensei!”

Who was ‘Sensei’? Didn’t matter. Whoever it was, Youko wanted to save this Girl.

Youko paddled through the branches on her phyllopod feet. Her talents really shone here. It was as if she’d developed these feet for this moment in particular.

She found a hollow inside the labyrinth. Two Girls were facing off inside it. One, like Youko, wore a segmented exoskeleton. It was like a cone lying on its side, with a head on the thicker end, with four eyes on the tips of the stalks growing from the head, and two sharp pincers that ruthlessly tormented her

opponent. Her opponent was by far the most grotesque-looking Girl Youko had seen thus far. Like someone had tried to make a fish out of slug parts and failed, it didn't have an exoskeleton, just a slimy exterior. Between two dark, lightless eyes was a long nose-like organ. Countless bits of flesh stretched out of the feeble-looking body like abortive fins. The creepiest thing of all was her mouth. The mouth had no jaw. Just a hole, like the inside of her body was spilling out of her. Around the hole were countless rows of teeth.

"Help..." The words were spilling from this sinister creature's soul.

Youko moved before realizing it. She set her feet on the branches, and pushed off, propelling herself forward. She rocketed towards the bully Girl like a pachinko ball, attacking with her mandibles.

"Who the hell are you!?" the pincer Girl yelled, thrown by Youko's surprise entrance. She lost one eye before she could even bring her pincers into play. "Argh! You want some? You won't like me now that I'm angry! I'll..."

Without letting her opponent finish her boast, Youko attacked again. She closed her oversized mandibles and tried to slice off her opponent's head. The now three-eyed Girl hastily leveraged her pincers, keeping the mandibles open. But Youko was stronger and was slowly forcing them closed.

"Give! I surrender! You win, just let me live!"

Youko didn't bat an eye, and just applied more pressure. A crack appeared in the pincers' exoskeleton, and they began to crumple. The pincer Girl knew her life was in danger and began frantically scrambling her legs, trying to back away. Her efforts were in vain. The spikes on Youko's mandibles would not let her run.

"No! Please... I don't want to die...!"

Slowly but surely Youko's mandibles broke the Girl's pincers. The pincers were filled with tasty-looking red flesh. Her mandibles didn't stop there. They fastened around the head and began tearing into that. This Girl had once commanded a broad view of the world with her four eyes, but now she had only one eyeball left. Bodily fluids and nerves seeped out of the eye stalks. It was a tragic sight, but Youko was hell bent on making her even more tragic. Pressure from her mandible's spikes cracked her opponent's exoskeleton easily. Pressure was applied in inverse proportion to the surface area affected. By

focusing her strength on the pointed spikes, the pressure increased exponentially. Chalk one up to physics. It was scientifically inevitable that the contents of this head would come spilling out.

Her mandibles pulped the central nervous system, severing the head from the rest of the body. With no command tower the best body around was useless. The legs were still moving, but this was no longer the orderly movement of a moment before; they were moving at random, with no cohesion. In time these convulsions would die down, but it was best to eat while the body was still fresh. As her opponent wavered between life and death, Youko dug in, forcing her towards death's embrace.

"Eeek... Don't eat me..."

A terrified squeal. From the bullied Girl.

"I won't!" Youko said, munching away.

"Really?"

"I promise! Oh, where are my manners? Why don't you eat some, too? We can talk over the meal!"

"OK. I'll trust you for now."

She was definitely still wary.

Youko paid this no attention and kept talking to her in a friendly voice. Like she was approaching a frightened puppy, peeling away a layer at a time.

"What's your name? I'm Youko."

"Vayu."

A single word, but that word seemed to close the distance between them.

Vayu cautiously moved closer to Youko and put her mouth on the freshly killed Girl. Vayu had a unique method of consumption. With no jaw, she was forced to wrap her mouth around the Girl's corpse. She then scratched away at the surface with her rows of teeth, drinking the blood that spilled like a parasite.

For a while, neither spoke. Vayu must have been starving and was very

focused on her meal. Youko waited for her to finish.

When her appetite was satiated, Vayu spoke. "Why did you save me?"

"Hmm, I'm not really sure."

Youko dodged the question, but deep down, she knew exactly why. The way Vayu spoke, her personality, the air of sadness that spoke of the rejection she'd endured. She was Youko's type. Youko was attracted to Vayu like a magnetic force.

"Hmm. Well, I'm grateful. Thank you."

Vayu moved her fleshy strings, trying to leave. At this rate they'd be forced to part. If she did nothing now, Youko would regret it the rest of her life. This conviction prompted her to action.

"Wait!"

"What now?"

Youko hesitated, unsure what to say. If she admitted Vayu was her type, she'd just drive her away. Different scenarios ran through her head on a loop, but the question that finally popped out surprised even her.

"Who's 'Sensei?'"

"...a Girl who helped me, once."

Instantly, a nasty feeling filled Youko's heart. Like she couldn't bear Vayu being close to any other Girls. She knew this wasn't fair and pushed it back down. "Where is she now?"

"She died." The curtness in her reply belied a deep sorrow.

But Youko's heart leapt. Rejoicing at the news of someone's death was a horrible thing to do, but she couldn't deny the relief she felt.

"That's too bad..." she said carefully, hiding her emotions.

"I'd better be going."

"Where to?"

She asked this reflexively, trying to draw out the conversation as long as

possible. Vayu hesitated, unsure whether to answer. She was silent for several seconds, then spoke.

“I’m looking for the Girls gacha.”

“The Girls gacha?”

Come to think of it, all the gacha she’d found were outfit gacha. If this world was based on *Evo Gals*, it made sense that there was a Girls gacha somewhere.

“They say dead Girls come out of that gacha. I’m gonna bring Sensei back to life.”

She must really care about this Sensei. There was a fierce determination behind those words.

Youko wanted to help. She felt an urge to at least share her problems until they found the Girls gacha. It was like that urge had always been inside her. She couldn’t exactly call it a pure emotion. She definitely had some impure thoughts lurking deep inside. She wanted Vayu to rely on her. She felt like having Vayu rely on her would validate her. She had a need to force that twisted relationship.

“Vayu, I’d like to go with you.”

Vayu gave Youko a long, hard look. There was doubt in those dark eyes, but it soon gave way to joy.

“OK. It’s strange, but I feel like we’ve met before. I don’t know why. Something about you seems familiar.”

For a long time, they stared at each other. Compound eyes locked gazes with primitive lenses. It was a mutual feeling that this meeting could only be described in cliché terms like ‘destined.’

“Then let’s go,” Youko said, heading back the way she’d come. Vayu followed in silence.

“Youko! You OK?” Dyaus came swimming over the moment she emerged from the branches. She swam circles around Youko, tapping her back with her parapodia.

“I’m fine! That tickles.”

“And who’s this?” Ganapati said, extending a feeler in Vayu’s direction.

“She’s Vayu. A new companion.”

“Woah, woah. I thought I was the leader here! I didn’t approve this.”

When exactly had anyone made Dyaus the leader?

“I dunno if this is the right time to make new friends. She looks weak, too. What use will she be?”

It had not occurred to Youko that Dyaus might not approve. Dyaus always seemed so delighted by any new thing that Youko had assumed she’d love the idea.

“Looks like I’m not welcome here.”

There was an awkward silence.

“Dyaus, that was rude,” Ganapati said, trying to deescalate. “Vayu, can you tell us what you’re good at?”

“Not much. The only high-rarity thing I’ve got is this.” She indicated her nose. “I’ve been saving up my points, so I haven’t pulled from the gacha much.”

“What’s that good for?”

“It’s an electroreceptor. If I use this, nearby Girls...” She broke off, as if noticing something. “Oh, one’s getting closer. Heading our way.”

“Hmm... What kind of Girl?” There was something faintly scornful in Dyaus’ tone.

“She’s big... much bigger than any of us.” Vayu was growing tense. “Maybe you should hide.”

“Hide? We’re pretty strong. You sure you’re not exaggerating?”

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

This pointless squabble was wasting precious seconds.

Before they knew it, a giant face was right on top of them. A tengu. A face like a tengu, with a ludicrously large nose. The entire surface of it was covered in

sinister lumps. At the root of the nose were two eyes, each as large as Youko's entire body. The eyes turned, locking directly onto Youko.

"Youko! Look out!"

Youko was only able to avoid the tengu's attack because Dyaus rammed its side. The tengu briefly left, made a wide turn, and came in for another attack. At last they had a grasp of the creature's whole. It was a strange one. Youko had never seen or heard of anything like it in her previous life. The whole thing was streamlined, but the fins had membranes, like bat wings. The bones were clearly visible. Translucent membranes spread out like a stealth bomber. At the rear, the tail was split in two like a pair of legs, and it swam by kicking these. It was a strange Girl, part fish, part bird, part insect, and part mammal.

The tengu Girl's mouth yawned open. It had a strong jaw, and a lot of needle-like teeth. They looked like they could easily break even Ganapati's shell.

Its massive wings flapped, slapping the ocean floor. Dirt plumed upwards, making it very hard to see. They were plunged into darkness.

Chomp! A huge mouth closed right next to Youko. The water pressure sent her flying away. This Girl was far stronger than they'd expected. They'd gotten cocky. A short period of success had made them forget they could be outmatched. They were frogs in the well. They could never beat a monster like this, no matter how hard they tried. They were all going to die. They'd be killed and all their points used to pull from a gacha!

"I told you all you should hide," Vayu said, suddenly right next to her.

"Vayu! I'm glad you're safe." She was legitimately relieved. "How'd you know it was coming?"

"I can detect the bioelectricity nearby Girls give off," she said, pointing at her nose. "Pretty sure it can, too. On a much larger scale."

"Any way we can fight it?"

"Nope," Vayu said, firmly. "We'd better duck into those branches. If we're lucky, it'll give up."

Youko and Vayu found the other two and headed directly towards the

branches. Ganapati lifted the branches up and the other three rushed in.

The long-nosed Girl handled this in a horribly simple way. It just swung its head and knocked the branches aside. Branches three times as thick as Youko was long were sent flying.

“Uh-oh... this is it... We’re all gonna die...” Youko had already died once and was preparing herself to die again.

“Wait, show me your cards!” Vayu yelled.

Show her cards? She hadn’t even known that function existed. But she tried it anyway.

“Yes... We might just have a chance...” Vayu said. “Level up your extrusome!”

Extrusome was a card she’d had since she was an amoeba but had ignored since she didn’t know what it was for. She leveled it up with her few remaining points and some other cards. The name changed to R: Cnidocyte.

“Equip that to your mandibles! If you get even one hit in we’ve got a chance!”

Youko made ready to launch herself daringly out from the branches. But the monster’s mouth was right in front of her. If she popped out now, she’d be inhaled and chewed up before she had a chance to do anything.

“I’ll distract it!”

When she saw Youko hesitate, Vayu ran out instead, desperately flailing her little body to draw the monster’s attention. Its massive eyes turned. Now! Youko stretched her mandibles as wide as they would go and charged, clamping onto its warty nose.

Familiar red fluid poured out of the wounds. Once, twice, three times, four times, five times. She chewed and chewed, widening the wound.

The giant body shook itself. She tightened her mandibles, trying to keep it from shaking her off. At last its raging subsided. The eyes glazed over. The poison had taken effect.

Compared to Youko, this thing was the size of an airplane — and now it slowly came to a rest on its side. She’d won. They’d survived.

Wait, Vayu? Was Vayu safe?

“I’m fine,” Vayu said, parting the sand clouds. She appeared to be uninjured.

“Vayu, you did great. Of course, so did you, Youko,” Ganapati said, emerging from the branches.

Dyaus followed. “I gotta admit it. Thanks,” she said. She seemed a little miffed, though.

“Well? I think Vayu’s made a good case for her inclusion in the party, right?” Youko said, so proud she didn’t even notice Dyaus’ disgruntlement.

“I’m sorry I bad-mouthed you earlier, Vayu,” Dyaus said, reluctantly.

“In that case, I think we should throw her a welcome party!”

“Agreed!”

Naturally, the main dish was the Girl they’d just killed.

III

Drip. Drop. Rain fell. A soft patter. A gentle shower. How long had it been? Girls appeared from all around, opening mouths to drink the rain, hunting those who did, and waiting to scavenge the carcasses. There were as many ways of living as there were Girls.

The forest was a place of bounty for them. The forest itself was made of Girls — the ones who'd pulled a rare card called Chloroplast and couldn't be bothered to move around anymore. The Girls who stopped moving soon lost the ability to communicate with other souls. Action kept the mind clear and thus kept the flesh from corrupting the mind.

Thud. Thud. A far-off sound. The Girls used whatever sensory methods they had to detect it, and fled. Anything capable of making a noise like that was cause to skedaddle. Valor was for fools. Survival was all that mattered.

A massive Girl appeared. Her hardened skin was covered with scales and she had four legs, with a spiral horn-like shell on her head. Anyone who didn't know better might mistake it for a magnificent crest.

This was Ganapati. The form Ganapati had taken for life on land. She was ten times larger than she'd been in the ocean. How had she become so large? The secret lay in the crest. She did not wear that for style alone. It was an important trick to make such a large body stand upright. Ammonoidea and Nautilus have similar spiral shells. These function as a ballast, controlling their rising and sinking via the absorption of water. Ganapati's crest served as ballast, too. But in place of water, it used gas.

Girls without an endoskeleton couldn't grow that large on land — they'd be crushed by their own weight. Even supported by an endoskeleton, you'd run out of space to keep the organs. To overcome this dilemma, she'd implemented this ballast tank. The tank was filled with pure hydrogen. Hydrogen was the lightest gas in the universe. So light that it made her heavy body that much lighter. Her body was no longer being crushed under her own weight. No

matter how large she got, it never stopped her moving about. This was the ideal diet plan.

Naturally, hydrogen does not exist in nature. Making it took a great deal of effort. This was where Vayu came in. Her current form was drastically different from what it had once been. She no longer had eyes. She no longer needed any sensory organ cards, so she'd cleared them all from her deck. In their place, she'd enhanced her electric organs. On the old Vayu, it had looked like Pinocchio's nose, but now it was a significant portion of her total bulk. She looked like a snake with no eyes. A long, thick torso. A slight swelling at one end, where her head was. But this impression was misleading. What looked like a torso was actually her nose — the organ that generated electricity. Thousands upon millions upon billions of electrocytes were all bundled together. The voltage each generated was insignificant, but with this many together she could produce a significant electrical discharge.

And what was that electricity used for? Making oxygen and hydrogen. Oxygen was the main thing they needed, and hydrogen was just a byproduct. When Vayu had still been in the water, she had been trying for the cards she needed to evolve lungs. But all she found were cards that grew her electrocytes, leaving her with no choice but to evolve her electric organs and adapt them for use on land. High purity oxygen was vital for survival on land without lungs. The way to make oxygen was to apply electrolysis to water. $2\text{H}_2\text{O} \rightarrow 2\text{H}_2 + \text{O}_2$ — a simple chemical equation. Fortunately, water was plentiful. On the lower side of Vayu's electric organ were swellings covered in hairy protuberances. Those were her electrolysis organs. The hairs drew moisture up, sending it straight to them. The oxygen generated was absorbed by the overhanging curtain sticking out of her sides — the gills she'd developed. This way, even without any water flow, her gills received enough to breathe.

At first, she was discarding the hydrogen, but by teaming up, Vayu and Ganapati had found a way to make more efficient use of it. Vayu's body was coiled up inside Ganapati's spiral shell, and the hydrogen she released made Ganapati's body lighter.

As they pulled from the gacha, they found even better uses for the hydrogen. Ganapati acquired nozzles — the kind you stick into prey and use like a straw to

drink their blood. She could use these to eject hydrogen, then use some teeth at the tips like a flint, turning them into flamethrowers. This was pretty powerful.

Meanwhile, Youko and Dyaus hadn't changed that much. Arthropods like the two of them didn't require major changes to move onto land. Dyaus just turned her fins into wings and learned to fly. Youko had Dyaus carry her around. She would lie on her back, and both of them would wrap their limbs around the other's torso, and then Dyaus would take off. Youko was responsible for attacking. Her gacha pulls had made her very good at stretching her neck out. She had a long neck folded many times like origami, and she could rapidly extend it like a robotic arm, snatching prey off the ground with her mandibles. With the cnidocytes equipped, poison rapidly spread through her prey's bodies. This method was made possible by a protein called resilin. Resilin was an extremely elastic rubbery material, able to return to its original shape with minimal energy loss. When it had first popped out of the gacha she hadn't been sure what to make of it, but after reading the explanation she soon realized just how versatile a card it really was.

Youko and Dyaus were the advance scouts, and Ganapati and Vayu were the main offensive unit. The destructive force of the strategy was tremendous. Girls thought they'd finally escaped from the flamethrowers only to have a pair of mandibles shoot down out of the sky and bite their heads off. Even if their necks were too thick to bite off, she'd just inject poison and finish them off. There was no escape. Imagine how terrifying their assault must have been to Girls living peacefully in the forest. It left lasting trauma. No, it didn't even do that — a moment after the fear hit them, they were torn to pieces and digested. In a sense, this was the fastest, most efficient means of divesting them of trauma. They left no mess behind.

The four of them headed inland. At last the trees began to thin, and the air grew dry. They'd reached a savanna. There was less water available here, and the chloroplast Girls found it difficult to maintain larger sizes, growing steadily smaller. To minimize evaporation, they made their surfaces hard and their bodies round. They looked like rocks — rocks with roots running deep into the

ground, searching for water. These roots also served as traps, stabbing smaller passing Girls and draining their bodily fluids. There was a war going on underground far more frantic than you'd ever imagine from their lethargic surface appearance.

Their roots also served to mark their territory. If you could sever an opponent's roots from the base, you could claim their territory for your own. But such attacks carried a hefty risk. Attacking meant sending your own roots deep into enemy territory, and this could expose you to retaliation. It was quite common for an overly aggressive attack to be met with a devastating counter. As a result, a variety of strategies were developed. There were schemes to bait an opponent into an attack and turn the tables on them, schemes to stake out a domain on poor land where few rivals were found, schemes for slipping in on the edges of a territory disputed by two equal powers, and schemes for deliberately allowing poison to affect your own soil. But all of them survived through blood, sweat, and tears.

Splat! A Girl was crushed underfoot. *Splat!* And another. Ganapati killed them both. Feelers pulled their bodies to her mouth, crunching between her teeth. Dyaus and Youko arrived back from a scouting run, came in for a landing, and gathered around the bodies.

"Weird stuff over that way," Dyaus said, her mouth full. "Lots of white lines."

"Can you be a little more specific, Dyaus?"

"There were white lines on the ground in a lattice-pattern. It was clearly unnatural," Youko explained.

"That's definitely a Girl," Vayu said. She was inside the shell, making electricity in total darkness. "We should go eat her. You get lots of points from strong Girls."

Vayu ate a lot of other Girls, saving up to pull from the Girls gacha. Youko was helping her, but occasionally she grew anxious, wondering what would happen to her once they found Sensei again. Would Vayu no longer need her? Would she and Sensei go off on their own? That would be very sad. But she told herself that Vayu's happiness was her happiness. Their time together was a real source of joy. So much better than before; back then she might as well have been

dead.

Splat! Spltt! Splsh! The march of death echoed across the savanna. Girls who'd survived for many years found their lives abruptly ending. Ganapati killed about thirty of them on the way to the place Dyaus had found.

Youko thought of train tracks when she saw them up close — tracks running as far as the eye could see. Two white lines stretched aimlessly across the ground. Looking closely, there was a clear pattern. The land was divided into districts, and the rock Girls were assembled in an orderly fashion. What could that mean?

“Oops!”

Youko stubbed a toe on something. She looked down, and saw a round, translucent mineral. A crystal? It seemed to be fastened to the white lines.

What was this? Before she had time to think, she heard a sound.

“Something’s coming! Look out!” Ganapati yelled.

She was right. Youko could see something coming their way. This Girl was big. The overall shape was fish-like, but with pancake-shaped segments assembled to look like one. It was like someone had taken apart a centipede and forced it into the shape of a fish. The head was a half-sphere, like the old-type Shinkansen, with two eyes on the sides and giant lensed eyes. The segments got steadily smaller from the head but widened out again towards the tail. At the rear was a set of nozzles, like an airplane engine.

Below the head was a skirt of boards attached to her, and below the skirt were a number of additional limbs. Two of these gripped the rails, allowing her to rocket towards them.

She had divided her body segments up like the cars in a train. Behind the massive head was a long row of cars. They seemed to be on stilts — two long, thin legs stood on the rails, with rods running between them. From the center of the rod was a bundle of veins wrapped in membrane, connecting it to the segments before and after. There were no wheels; instead, it seemed to be squeezing out a fluid that pulsed through the rails. A number of attachment

organs were resting on the shoulders of the stilts. One car had a red accordion-like tube moving up and down. Another had a sponge-like thing swelling and shrinking. There was a car with countless trumpet-shaped organs. And another one with mouths. Lots of different kinds of mouths. Proboscises for sucking blood. Mortars to grind things. Sacs to digest them. Knives to slice and dice...

As she got closer, a wave of unease washed over Youko. When Girls got close, she could usually hear the voices of their souls, whether faint or clear. But this Girl's voice was bizarre. It didn't seem like a person's voice at all. More like it was coming from a *thing*. It was a noise like a train. "Ka-chunk ka-chunk ka-chunk toot toot!" Like a noise someone convinced they were a train would make.

Ganapati seemed equally spooked, and quickly launched an attack, using the hydrogen Vayu generated to roast the train's engine with fire.

The Girl train burned. Youko's feelers caught an unpleasant chemical odor and then a shockwave shook her body. An explosion. Youko dug her claws into the ground, weathering the blast. Dyaus and Ganapati weren't so lucky. Dyaus was specialized towards flight, and her massive wings caught the wind and she was swept far off into the distance. Ganapati lost her balance and crumpled to the ground.

"Chug chug chug! Ka-clunk ka-clunk!"

The Girl train had survived the explosion. She'd cut loose the front car and a few more that had caught fire and was reversing away from them.

"Wait!" Youko's head shot out, grabbing one of the front cars. She squeezed her mandibles tight, then let go of the ground. Her body shot through the air onto the fleeing car.

"Creeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeak... Squeeeeeeeeeeeak! Ga-chunk Ga-clunk!"

The Girl train's response was simple. It cut loose the car Youko was on.

And then it launched an attack. The lead car bucked and extended a fleshy tube. The tube was engorged and hardened, and it fired missiles. The missiles exploded in midair, and with no loss of momentum, the contents rained down on Youko. It was a cluster bomb. Youko used the car as a shield. She dangled

herself below the rod, trying to weather the assault. The bomb had been filled with bones of all shapes and sizes—it was ready for all sorts of targets. There were bones like shuriken, like pencils, like dice. They tore the flesh of the car she was using as a shield. Even detached from the main body, the car appeared to still be alive; it writhed in pain, trying to slither away.

The car was made from cylindrical parts covered in shell — an effective structure to handle projectile attacks. The missile’s contents were deflected, ricocheting elsewhere. But the sheer volume was too much for it. Knife-like bones sliced into the segment, cutting it. Then a giant knuckle struck the bone and cracked the shell. The integrity lost, the flesh inside was exposed. White meat. It was filled with slimy white flesh and a number of smaller yellow and red organs. It was like splitting open a crab. The organs exposed, the car listed to one side, and collapsed. Even with its guts exposed to air it was still alive. It scrambled to right itself and get back on the rails, convulsing.

Youko’s legs were injured, too. She poked her head out from under the derailed car.

The Girl train backed up to a branch line, reordered itself, and came charging back in Youko’s direction. The new front car had an organ like a praying mantis’ scythe on it. This was bad news. She staggered sideways, trying to move away from the rails. But her legs were hurt too badly to move quickly.

“Chunk chunk chunk chunk chunk chunk!”

The car was getting closer. But Youko’s pace was hopelessly slow. She was moments from being a shish kebab. She wanted to close her eyes, but with no eyelids she was forced to watch certain death approaching.

“Youko!”

Dyaus cried out from up in the sky. Youko unleashed the elasticity in her resilin and her neck shot out. Dyaus’ long legs snatched Youko’s neck out of the air. A moment later the train’s scythe swished through the space she’d been.

“You OK, Youko?”

“Somehow!”

Below them, the Girl train fired more cluster bombs. Dyaus used the

shockwaves to gain altitude.

“Shit! She’s going after Ganapati next!” Dyaus yelled.

Right in the path of the train was a giant clutching her spiral head — Ganapati. Given the difference in speeds between them, she’d already abandoned the idea of running. In a ranged battle, her opponent held the advantage. Her only chance was to get in close.

The train sped up, ramming Ganapati at full speed. The scythe pieced her skin, and fluids seeped out. But Ganapati hadn’t lost yet. She kicked the impaled leg, knocking the car away. The car derailed. The moment the Girl left the tracks she became very slow. She crawled along like a shellfish.

Ganapati jumped, crushing the car. Like popping bubble wrap, she stomped forward, flattening car after car. The Girl train backed away as fast as it could, firing and detonating cluster bombs just above the ground, heedless of the damage to her own cars. Stars, spheres, triangles, squares — a variety pack of bones struck Ganapati’s face, crushing an eye. As soon as her pursuer wavered, the train sacrificed more cars, and ran for it. Dyaus flapped her wings as hard as she could but was unable to keep up.

To keep up the chase, Ganapati took to the skies. She had Vayu increase hydrogen production, taking to the air like a blimp. She turned the nozzles to her rear, mixed hydrogen and oxygen, and caused them to explode, giving chase and matching the train’s speed.

“Faster!”

Above them both, Youko urged Dyaus on. Ganapati was gaining a lead on them, and Youko was frustrated by her inability to help. Of course, her concern was with Vayu, not Ganapati. Vayu had no shell or scales. She could be killed easily. Just the thought of her dying was a crushing weight on Youko’s heart. She was prepared to do literally anything to prevent Vayu’s death.

Below her, the train was taking itself apart at the branch line. Two different sets of cars went in two directions. Ganapati hesitated for a moment, but then picked one and went after it.

But this was the wrong choice. The other set of cars backed up and followed

the rails after Ganapati. She was caught in a pincer attack.

Realizing her disadvantage, Ganapati wavered between two strategies. She could use hydrogen to float higher and escape or kick up her burners and attack. She could not do both. There was a limit to how much hydrogen Vayu could produce. They'd already used a lot of it; if she used her fire, there would not be enough left to float. She was torn for a moment, but then decided to use her flamethrowers. She did a little tap dance, turning her face and raining fire down on both sets of cars. The attack quickly turned cars to lumps of charcoal, but neither slowed down at all. The Girl train had known she would take some damage and left the cars burning, aiming to crush Ganapati. With her hydrogen reserves low, Ganapati was very heavy and tragically slow. She used her feelers to yank the burning cars up, trying to get off the tracks, but the cars threw cable-like feelers with claws on the tips onto Ganapati's back. She lost her balance, fell, and was dragged back onto the rails.

"Ganapati!" Dyaus screamed. Her cry fell on deaf ears, and the two sets of cars took a firm grip on each side of Ganapati's body, and began moving in opposite directions, trying to rip her apart. Ganapati smacked the cable-like feelers, trying to dislodge the claws. But her feelers were designed to pick things up and weren't capable of slicing through the hardened cables. Ganapati's skin was slowly peeling off. Beneath the thick, dry-resistant skin was nothing but quivering white flesh. Imagine how it would feel to have that flesh exposed to the air. It would hurt. A lot. It hurt! Ganapati howled with pain, toppling over. The cars rolled onto her like she was a mountain, scythes at the ready. Their blades mercilessly slicing her legs. Over and over and over, trying to cut Ganapati's rubbery limbs off. They swung with full power, not caring if the blades chipped. Veins were severed, blue blood gushing forth. Legs came off. The severed limbs writhed around like new life forms.

The cars moved forward, between the legs. A cable shot into Ganapati's mouth, sank its hooks in her guts, and dragged it all out. Everything in Ganapati's belly passed through her mouth, turning her inside-out. Her eyeballs were dragged into her head and then popped out her mouth. Yet her eyes were still moving. Her organs and brain were all encased in the same translucent membrane, and the nerves ran from them to her eyeballs. The scythes sliced

open her innards. Her intestines were severed, and the brown refuse inside leaked out. It mingled with the blue blood, becoming an indescribable shade, like mashing all the colors together on a painter's palette.

With the table set, it was time for dinner. A car moved to the front with two massive needles that had small sacs at the rear. When the needles stabbed Ganapati's guts, the sacs began swelling up. At the same time, the pile of innards — all that remained of Ganapati — began shriveling. The sacs were absorbent, like leeches, able to inhale vast quantities of blood. As her blood was absorbed, Ganapati's voice faded.

"Ah! Ah! Ah! Ahhh! Ahhh... aahhh..." And then her soul voice cut out, yet her body was still moving. It was pulsing faintly while secreting a glistening mucus and slithering along.

"Stop!" Dyaus, having finally caught up, swooped down, tackling the train. A feeler swatted her away like a pesky fly. She flapped her wings frantically, but she and Youko went crashing to the ground.

Scythes came after them. Then a grey, slimy, long, mucus-covered creature came scrabbling out of Ganapati's empty eye sockets. It was Vayu. She couldn't see at all, but the cries of their souls had given her all she needed to know about the situation outside. The needle-like organs found a new target and pierced her body. Instantly, convulsions ran across the car. Not just the one car, either. Like dominos, the convulsions went from one car to the next. A charred stench filled the air — the smell of flesh burning. The convulsing cars went still, never to move again. The electric current had induced necrosis.

Dyaus staggered forward, desperate to reach Ganapati.

Ganapati was in a frightful state. Everything that should be inside her had come out her mouth. Her blood had been drained away, and her organs sliced open.

"Ganapati! Ganapati, it's me. It's me..." Dyaus spoke to her. Of course, there was no reply.

"It's no use..." Vayu whispered. She was exhausted after generating that much electricity. "But if you pull from the Girls gacha... Maybe we can bring her back. Maybe."

The proposal enraged Dyaus. “Ganapati’s dead!” she roared. “And it’s all your fault! You’re the one who said we should come here! Why didn’t you come out and fight sooner? You should have died instead of her!”

“In that case... I guess the party’s splitting up.”

Dyaus wasn’t about to end things that easily. Once she hit her boiling point she was hard-wired to go the distance.

“Yeah, it is! This party’s over! But I’m gonna make you pay for this! You have to die for Ganapati!”

Dyaus bit Vayu. Vayu was too exhausted to use her one means of defense, her electricity. She could not resist. Her flesh was torn, and dark red blood welled out.

“Dyaus, stop!”

Youko’s head shot forward, her mandibles closing around Dyaus’ head. But Dyaus wouldn’t stop.

“I’m gonna kill her! She has to die! And I’m gonna do it!”

“No, you’re not!”

Youko increased the pressure in her mandibles. Cracks ran across the chitin shell covering Dyaus’ head. They grew larger, splitting open. The flesh inside exposed itself. The exoskeleton pushed into her innards, forcing them outwards. Her body shook. Her entire body was begging to stay alive. At last the convulsions no longer felt like she was suffering. The head fell off. Dyaus had been split in two. What else could that mean? She was dead. Dyaus was dead. Murdered. Youko had killed her. She had killed her partner on all these adventures. Both her best friend and her greatest rival — and she’d killed her.

Youko looked over at Vayu’s long, slimy body. Vayu seemed to have passed out. But she still had a pulse. She wasn’t dead yet.

It shocked even Youko, but the relief at seeing Vayu safe trumped the horror she felt over killing Dyaus. That was just how important Vayu was to Youko. So important she’d killed Dyaus reflexively, just to protect her.

If she was willing to go that far for her, she would grant her wish. They would

find the Girls gacha, and she would reunite her with this Sensei. Youko swore an oath.

IV

Failure! Failure! Failure! Every pull she did came up empty.

Behind Youko, a massive whirlpool swirled. Never before had the word massive seemed like such an understatement. The scale of the whirlpool was beyond the capacity of language.

It was large enough for several small planets to fit inside. In front of this whirlpool was a section of space painted pitch black. It was a perfect rectangle, like it had been sliced out with a knife. This was what had brought Youko here. It was the ultimate goal. The Girls gacha.

Youko was on a gas giant a long way from the planet where her second life had started. She'd survived this world for twenty-four more years than her first life had lasted. She'd stopped counting the days with any precision a long time ago. It was growing difficult for her to remember what it had been like to have a body she couldn't alter as she pleased.

The day Ganapati died, and she'd killed Dyaus, Youko and Vayu became one. They'd transformed themselves with the points gained from eating the train Girl, Dyaus, and Ganapati. The first thing she'd done was make Vayu part of her own body. Vayu had no eyes or nose and could only survive inside another Girl. To allow that, she'd made her own body larger, creating space for Vayu inside her body cavity.

Youko made herself a myriapod — like a mukade. Out of all the arthropods, this form was most suited for larger sizes. She could survive the increase in size without fundamentally changing the construction of her body. It allowed her to increase her height without the ratio between mass and surface area becoming fatal and suffocating her. She was just increasing the number of segments, the simplest method of making herself larger. And the larger she got the more legs she had and the stronger and faster she was.

Giant mukade Youko briefly made a forest her territory, but soon realized this did not allow her to demonstrate her full potential. There were too many obstructions, and her body was constantly getting tangled up in them. Any environment with lots of other Girls left segments of her body without specialized defense mechanisms the target of frequent attacks. She split her brain across several segments as a countermeasure, but this didn't entirely resolve the risk of incurring fatal damage.

For lack of better options, Youko started flying. In the air, she didn't have to worry about any Girls attacking her flanks. She stretched membranes between her legs, gliding. Without bird-like wings, keeping herself aloft required propellant. This was the hydrogen Vayu produced. Rather than make a new organ to serve as an engine, she simply made the tail segment explode to launch herself.

In time, she no longer needed to explode herself. She leveled up her excretory tubes into a single long, sturdy tube. Villus inside the tube had warts stuffed with fuel (a mixture of hydrogen and oxygen) and exploding these warts one after another formed her new engine.

This system proved to have other applications. By pointing her anus at the sky, she could turn herself into a giant cannon. Boasting an extremely high launch speed, the mukade cannon used a series of interior explosions to increase projectile velocity. It was the same principle as multistage rocket propulsion. All she had to do was make pits inside her excretory tube lined with explosive warts so that they wouldn't interfere with the trajectory of the projectile.

The projectiles evolved, too. At first she soaked excrement in explosive fluids and blew that up, but then learned to use pieces of Vayu instead. Vayu's electric organs could be adapted into a powerful attack mechanism — electromagnetic pulse bombs. Normally, EMPs release a burst of electromagnetic energy to destroy electronic devices, but they'd adapted this to affect brains as well, by using an EMP frequency that targeted the neuron.

When she fired an EMP bomb from her anus, blanketing an area, the Girls in range were driven mad. It was quite easy to eat mad Girls. She just flew around stretching out her head and snatching them up with her mandibles. Naturally,

as a side effect, Youko herself became somewhat mad. But she didn't mind being a little insane as long as she could grant Vayu's wish.

Youko looked for the next plan. She had to kill a lot more Girls. She had to kill and eat them. What could help accomplish that? Knowledge from her past life helped here. She remembered a thing called a nuclear bomb. She just had to make one of those.

But if she was going to make a nuclear bomb, she would need to protect herself and Vayu from it. She lined their genes with a lead coating, shielding them from harmful radiation, then burrowed deep in the ground, mining uranium — eating and refining it. As further protection against nuclear disaster, she made a number of additional brains, connecting them wirelessly. These splinter brains monitored the internal reactor she had growing in her guts like a tumor. Her hard work paid off, and she completed the nuclear bomb. The nuclear detonation also caused an EMP blast — two birds with one stone.

By detonating the nuclear bomb, she was also able to go to outer space. The principle was simple. She simply placed herself above the bomb and set it off. The shockwave sent her flying. That was it! A single big nuclear blast would have torn her body to pieces, but by detonating a number of small bombs at intervals her ascension was quite smooth. In space, her segmented construction came in handy again. She could explode her body parts, propelling herself around. There were already quite a lot of Girls living out here. Even an outfit gacha. This helped Youko alter herself further.

“Vayu, you'll see Sensei again soon,” she said.

No answer came. Living as a lump of flesh with no eyes or nose had taken its toll. The only thing she ever heard from Vayu these days was the occasional whisper. “Sensei... Sensei...”

Youko's flesh grew even larger. Her total length might have been over five kilometers. She resembled a wingless dragonfly or a skeletal fish. Her entire body was covered in a shell made of ceramic woven with carbon filaments. This protected her from the vacuum of space and from radiation.

Her tail was a skirt-shaped thruster. In a circle around it were a number of

wings. These were not designed for flight; they were heat sinks. Their function was to cool the surplus heat generated by the nuclear fusion used to propel herself forward.

The nuclear fusion was created with concentrated laser beams. Fuel ejected from the thruster would be struck by the countless laser emission organs that lined the hem of the skirt, the beams surrounding the fuel from all directions. The beams applied so much pressure to the fuel that fusion occurred.

The fuel was liquid hydrogen coated in an oil film. The organs that ejected the fuel were based on the spinnerets spiders used. But instead of secreting silk, they secreted oils, coating the liquid hydrogen as it was transported through her body. In gravity-less environments this created near perfect spheres.

The thruster grew more and more narrow towards the top, becoming a segmented rod. This went on for a bit before reaching the head. It was a head like a giant hornet, except with four eyes. Two giant compound fore-eyes covered a quarter of the face, and two smaller compound eyes faced her rear. On the end of her face was a mouth, pursed like a caricature, the mandibles extending from that. The pursed mouth was constructed like an airlock, protecting her innards from the vacuum.

Youko spent her days like any other Girl who lived in outer space. She fought, killed, and ate. Delicate control over the water vapor generated by the surplus heat of the fusion allowed her to approach the other Girls, grip them with her mandibles, stab them with her mouth, and slurp up their flesh. She did it all for Vayu. So she could be reunited with Sensei.

As she expanded the range of her territory in space, she began hearing rumors about the Girls gacha. Girls skilled at astrology had discovered something strange orbiting a gas giant towards the outside of the solar system.

Youko deemed this rumor worthy of investigation. She perfected her nuclear fusion system so she could head for the gas giant and voyaged forth on a lonely journey. It was a long trip, one that would take her several years with her current abilities, but what choice did she have?

On her way, Youko was completely alone. Vayu was long past being able to speak at all. There were no other Girls. She couldn't bring herself to send any

more friend requests. She was afraid she'd end up killing those she cared about again. So she spent her days gazing at the unmoving stars.

The only thing she needed to do during her trip was turn herself 180 degrees and start decelerating. Trajectory calculations were long since performed instinctively by her oversized cerebellum.

When the gas giant finally came into view, she felt saved by it. It was gorgeous. So many shades of red and blue and white. It was a massive storm. Just the sight of it left her awestruck.

She soon found the unnatural rectangle. Darkness cut a swatch out of the planet behind it. She was sure. This was the Girls gacha.

The gacha taxis she'd had since she was an amoeba was stimulated once more.

Youko approached the gacha. That familiar sensation drew near.

As the feeling grew closer, it took physical form. It was beautiful. A beautiful sensation. Youko knew this gacha would require an immense amount of points. It would have the appetite to end all appetites. It would be a bottomless pit. Youko believed she had saved up quite a lot of points. She had converted the flesh and blood of the Girls she ate each day into a hoard of points. Even then, she could only pull from the gacha a few times.

But she had to pull. The gacha was right in front of her. It was Youko's duty to pull.

The gacha and Youko had a wordless conversation. The gacha did not have a soul the way the Girls did. But she could feel that it wanted her points. And she knew that the prize would allow her to revive Vayu's Sensei.

She inserted her points and pulled.

Failure.

Failure, failure, failure, failure, failure, failure.

In no time, all her points were gone.

Youko didn't hesitate. She immediately whaled. What value did her life hold? Her mind had long since died. Not the day of the accident and her

reincarnation, but the day Dyaus and Ganapati died. Death had led to Youko's rebirth, and death had led to her dying once more. Before coming to this world, in her time spent under the control of the mobile game, Youko had been dead. But meeting Dyaus, Ganapati, and Vayu had brought her back to life. The reincarnation her death brought had given new life to her mind. And then Youko had died once more. The only thought remaining in her mind was to save Vayu. Vayu was the one reason she had left to go on living.

Her health, lifespan, volition, and existence drained away. When she'd first come to this world, Youko had let those drain away without much thought. She'd done the same thing before being reincarnated. But the revival of her mind had made Youko afraid to lose herself like this. Even so, she had to overcome that fear.

Drain, drain, drain. The points her health, lifespan, volition, and existence provided all went right into the gacha.

Failure. Failure. Failure. Failure.

Each time she drained her health, lifespan, volition, and existence, she felt like her body was growing lighter. Something was lost. A hollow feeling, like a tunnel being drilled through her. Little by little, the core of herself grew thinner. She was indistinct. The place and time she existed in were wavering, no longer seeming like they had any real basis. It was like her heart was filling with water, diluting it. Like the atoms within her were vaporizing one by one, and her construction was growing more diffuse. She forgot how to think. She couldn't even think about what thinking had been like. Drain... Drain... Drain... I'm draining away.

When all of her was drained, the universe began to warp. In the center of it, a light was floating. A warm light. A light of salvation, one accepting of all things. The light went right through Youko. It felt so wonderful. There was nothing but light in her world, now. As long as this light existed, that was enough for Youko. Light, please, just let me stay like this forever. The light had a word carved into it that validated the entirety of Youko's life.

"Winner."

Had a trillion years passed? Had it been a single second? She couldn't tell. Blacks began to seep back into the world. Black holes forming in the light she had thought perfect. The holes expanded, swallowing up the light. *Not yet! Just let me be here a little longer!* Youko screamed. She had no mouth or tongue or voice box but she screamed anyway. But the blackness kept expanding as if her pleas did not exist. Her time was up. Youko had drained her entire life away. She'd lost the right to live in this world. She couldn't enjoy the mobile game any longer. It was all over.

Death.

Youko had died.

And in death, she knew the reason for everything. She knew who Vayu's Sensei was, what the soul was, why she'd been reincarnated. She knew why mobile game addiction occurred, and what mobile games really were.

It all started with the birth of the universe. The instant vibrations occurred in the inflaton field, the universe had a soul.

What was a soul? *An extra dimension linked to the 11th dimension.*

Consider human consciousness. The most remarkable quality of it is that it lives within the realm of possibilities. Seeing red does not mean merely seeing red in the world that exists before your eyes. You see red. Not blue, not green, not yellow, but red. When this occurs, people compare what they see to other possibilities. But what are those other possibilities? The true nature of possibilities means not being controlled by what exists in the real world. Which makes it simple. Human consciousness makes perception possible by comparing the universe you are in to other universes. This technique is possible because the consciousness incorporates the soul, an extra dimension.

Countless varied universes exist in the 11th dimension. The soul is linked to a network of universes. Each time humans perceive something, their soul searches the conditions of other universes. You'd think it would take time to search so many universes, but don't worry. In the 11th dimension, light speed, the fastest speed attainable, is ten to the power of thirty times faster. This is the original speed light traveled at. That dawdling 300,000 kilometers a second

is only forced upon it because the 11th dimension has been crunched up inside the third, and light has to deal with all kinds of interference that doesn't let it take the shortest distance.

By searching other universes via the soul, humans are able to make all sorts of things possible. Perceiving the emotions of another human requires searching universes where that other person is yourself. Perceiving the past and the future involves searching universes where those times are the present.

Additionally, human culture is made possible by the soul. Fiction, science, logic, and religion are all only possible through using the soul to search other universes.

What is fiction? A search of another universe where fictional things actually exist.

What is science? A search of another universe where scientific models actually exist.

What is logic? A search of another universe where an ideal society based on logical principles actually exists.

What is religion? A search of another universe where mystic beings actually exist.

Unlike humans, computers have no souls. When they see red, they only interpret it as a set of wavelengths that exist in the real world. Computers have no way of escaping reality.

Why? Because computers do not have genes that have absorbed and made use of extra dimensions within their internal environments. The process of human evolution has allowed us to acquire these genes.

130,800,000,000 years ago, the giant soul that existed at the moment the universe was born was squeezed into the third dimension as the expansion of the universe and creation of matter caused it to lose energy. A few souls entered a supercooled state, surviving, if scattered to the corners of the universe.

Humans used the particle-sized door to the 11th dimension to evolve a consciousness. By absorbing scattered extra dimensions into themselves, they

learned how to use an extra organ in their brains called the soul.

The soul contained free will, the means to break free of determinism. Why? Because the soul was able to break the law of conservation of energy and the second law of thermodynamics.

The mechanism behind this lay in the changes to light speed within the soul. According to Einstein's formula, energy was equivalent to mass times the speed of light squared. The speed of light is generally assumed to be a fixed number but within the soul it's actually variable. Each time the soul takes action the speed of light changes, creating a vast quantity of latent energy. Let us call this free will energy.

Free will energy released mankind from the yoke of determinism. By creating this entirely new energy, we escaped the schedule set by the law of causality.

Free will energy also saved the universe itself from destruction. By shattering the second law of thermodynamics, the whole of the universe became an orderly cosmos.

Unlike the soul, evolution was a deterministic system. What was evolution? A Turing machine running DNA as its language. Evolution was a Turing machine that calculated genetic information with a high adaptability rating based on DNA variation. Turing machines were a model created to understand the true nature of calculations. Any and all software information processing can be understood by translating it to the operations of a Turing machine.

Turing machines were a deterministic process. Imagine, if you will, the world as depicted in Conway's Game of Life. Using this model, we can learn about the evolution the Turing machine produces. The Game of Life works thusly: imagine a two-dimensional grid of infinite size. The spaces in the grid are called cells. Each of those cells contains only two conditions — living, or dead. There we apply the following four principles.

Rule of Birth: If a dead cell is in contact with three living cells, the dead condition changes to living.

Rule of Survival: If a living cell is in contact with two or three living cells, the cell remains living.

Rule of Underpopulation: If a living cell is in contact with one or less living cells, the cell becomes dead.

Rule of Overpopulation: If a living cell is in contact with four or more living cells, the cell becomes dead.

With these four principles, given sufficient time and space, it will eventually evolve until a self-replicating cell pattern is born. Cell patterns demonstrate a variety of survival strategies, and it's likely some of these will even develop intelligence. But this is a world of flawless determinism. The initial pattern determines everything that will happen in the future.

However, there are problems that are impossible for a Turing machine to solve. This is called the halting problem. Turing machines are unable to determine if a specific program will reach an eventual halt or continue infinitely. This is the background principle supporting evolution's productivity and agony. Evolution must continue producing living things indefinitely to calculate their fitness. These calculations are driven by natural selection, unrolled in the test grounds of bloody conflict.

The soul is an existence superior to a Turing machine. It can bring information from other universes to the universe through the anti-deterministic free will energy. We could call it a super Turing machine, a Turing machine with an oracle program equipped to allow it to get past the halting problem.

With the birth of the super Turing machine called the soul, the Turing machine called evolution became outdated — this should have spelled its end.

But evolution remained. Why?

With the birth of the soul, evolution was about to be selected out.

Systems evolve in the face of selection pressure. Evolution itself was such a system.

Evolution evolved to accommodate the soul.

The evolution of evolution was not that unusual. Before it ran on DNA, evolution's language was RNA. As the environment changes, the system of evolution was forced to change, too.

Once again, evolution evolved. So what lay at the end of this? Dinosaurs evolved into birds. Monkeys evolved into humans. What did evolution evolve into?

Evolution evolved into mobile games.

If you look closely at mobile game systems, you can see the vestiges of evolution in them. The gacha is birth, with the sudden mutation that goes along with it; the points you spend on the gacha are the energy and opportunity required to engage in reproduction. The normal gacha was the relatively inexpensive asexual reproduction, while sexual reproduction was the premium gacha, requiring a significant price. So what was whaling? Whaling was the addition of free will energy to jump start evolution within the game. Evolution is not born from nothing. As a deterministic process under the limits of thermodynamics, it always demands energy from outside sources. When the language it ran on was DNA, evolution required energy from the sun. When it evolved into a mobile game, it required free will energy from the soul.

Mobile games — those were the organs made when evolution evolved to harvest free will energy from the soul. They used approval as bait to lure souls to it, feeding off their free will energy. The history of life shows that evolving systems routinely make use of the threat to themselves. For example, when cyanobacteria were covering the Earth with oxygen, oxygen was poisonous to life at the time. However, faced with this danger, aerobic bacteria evolved that could make use of the oxygen. By playing mobile games, humans were wasting the free will energy they should have been directing outwards. It was used not to maintain the order of the universe, but simply to expand mobile gaming. By continuing to play mobile games, free will was lost. The destruction of the law of conservation of energy and the second law of thermodynamics caused by the birth of the soul was being repaired by mobile games. Freedom was lost, and determinism ruled the universe once more.

Further evolution occurred between the mobile games evolution had evolved into. The most successful of these was *Evolution Girls*. In order to more effectively harvest free will energy, *Evo Gals* hastened the expansion of mobile gaming. Mobile games spread more rapidly than the operating companies anticipated. The companies believed to be managing the games were, in fact,

simply being used by the games.

First, all national systems were converted to mobile games. Medical insurance and pension payouts were redistributed via gacha pulls. The constitution's protections for human rights were interpreted to mean a minimum guaranteed number of gacha pulls. A healthy life with the acceptable minimal cultural value was considered one in which you could login to a mobile game daily. As time passed, privacy rights and voting rights were also divvied up and turned into gacha prizes. In time, gacha prizes included not just rights, but bodies. This was the dawn of the age where you needed at least seven hearts to get any respect. At first, they only handled hearts, kidneys, and other human organs, but to stimulate even more desires they began including all conceivable body parts. All humans became Girls, and they began providing free will energy just by pulling from gacha. Points became free will energy itself.

When the universe was born, souls anticipated all of this. That's why they'd created a countermeasure. The universal soul created a backup system in the 11th dimension. The backup was a collection of extra dimensions, a scout probe soul dropped into the third dimension's universe to monitor the movements of mobile games. The backup system lurked in the 11th dimension like a giant octopus, lowering souls into the third dimension. One of these was Youko.

Normally, a soul would never be reincarnated. The reason for this was that dying broke apart the extra dimensions implanted in the brain, and the same arrangement would never again come together. However, the souls that were part of the universal soul's backup scout probe program were able to be reincarnated. Upon death, the soul inside them would not be scattered internally like normal, but reabsorbed by the 11th dimension backup, and placed back in the universe once more. Why would it go to all that trouble? To avoid having free will data absorbed by the mobile games. Free will data was born from the changes to light speed. The backup floating in the 11th dimension could not generate free will energy on its own; it needed points of contact with the universe. Those points of contact were the reincarnated. When the reincarnated died, the energy they'd spent their lives making wasn't absorbed by the mobile games but preserved by the backup. By repeating this process a great many times, it planned to store up enough energy to resist the

mobile games.

To fight the mobile games, it needed to fully understand them. Youko had been chosen as one of these reincarnated souls to fight the mobile games' control of the universe and to provide free will and resist determinism. Youko, who had fallen deeper in the swamp of mobile games than anyone.

Youko drifted through the 11th dimension. There was no time in the universe beneath her. If there was any, it was a sham. Time. The true nature of it required free will. The true nature of time lay in the distinction between the present, past, and future. But in a deterministic universe only the present exists. There is no past or future. Determinism only allows for a time-like progression based on the laws of causality. All that existed is a privileged point in time we call the present. These points in time are related to each other, in that one occurs before or after another, but that's all. In a universe where free will had shattered determinism the real present exists. The point at which free will activates is the present. By activating free will, we can create a future that had not yet existed. As opposed to the deterministic universe, in which all points in time exist simultaneously.

In a universe with free will, time traveling into the past causes paradoxes. But in a deterministic universe, time travel can do no such thing. Even if you traveled into the past, all events and actions are predetermined, so history can't be changed, and no paradoxes occur. Therefore, in a deterministic universe controlled by mobile games, time travel is possible.

Youko sent her soul into the past and was reincarnated. She became a number of different Girls and had all sorts of adventures. And she experienced death countless times. Each time she died, she stored up a little more free will energy.

One day, she was reunited with Vayu. Vayu was still very young, and Youko served as her guide. Vayu called her Sensei and worshipped her. Youko realized once again that her feelings for Vayu were no small consideration. She'd lived thousands of lives, but Vayu was the only one who'd ever made her feel like this. She wished they could be together forever. She wanted to hear Vayu's voice. She was lonely, suffering, and starving, but with Vayu, all those things felt

good.

Her time with Vayu came to an end. That was destiny. In a deterministic universe, there was no way to alter her fate. But Youko spread the seeds to defeat the mobile game. She told Vayu about the Girls gacha, promised they would meet again someday, and went to her death.

And now Youko was embarking on her final reincarnation. She reentered the universe as the prize she had won by gambling on the Girls gacha with her own life.

When a Girl spawned, they pulled from the outfit gacha. This is where Youko used the power of her soul. She activated all the free will energy she'd saved up, bucking the world's determinism. She changed the gacha's drop rates. Information from a universe with different drop rates flowed into this one.

A fanfare sounded. And not the normal fanfare. A solemn, mystic melody that burrowed its way deep into the center of the brain. There was a swirl of light, and the card she'd drawn was revealed.

GR. God Rare.

GR: Graviton Body Set.

Gravitons — besides the soul, the one particle able to access the 11th dimension. This card gave her a body composed of gravitons. It allowed her to interact with the 11th dimension in the flesh.

Graviton legs, graviton legs, graviton feelers, graviton heart, graviton mouth, graviton eyes, and a graviton brain. With the full set of cards equipped, Youko flew out into the universe. She could easily surpass the limits of the third dimension. She took a glance around the universe and saw a Girl's corpse floating in space. One of Youko's bodies, shed a great number of reincarnations back. Vayu was inside that corpse.

"Just wait," Youko whispered.

Before her was a universe controlled by mobile games, one in which the true nature of time had been lost. Free will energy was harvested and all things were decided based on the laws of causality. Humans were being herded by mobile games, and the universe was hurtling relentlessly towards its doom. Voices of

suffering echoed through the universe, though space, and through time. “It hurts! Help! Save me!”

Girls were killing each other, eating each other, parasiting off each other. Their suffering filled every corner of the universe. Screams echoed from all directions. The sounds of flesh rendered, guts gouged, eyes crushed, brains eaten from the inside out. The smell of blood, the odor of spinal fluid, the stench of half-eaten rotting organs. Girls had no way of escaping this slaughter. The only way for them to survive was to kill others. In the midst of this living hell, there were rare glimpses of friendship and budding love, but these soon became mere alliances designed to slaughter more effectively. Just watching this was enough to tear Youko apart. So much suffering. So much pain. So much fear.

This universe must be refuted! Youko’s rage drew forth free will energy. A number of gravitons were drawn from gravity fields affected by that energy.

“This must end! I’ll end it! Right here and now!”

Youko unleashed all her gravitons at the mobile games. At the mobile games in all directions in time. The gravitons invaded the universes, acting powerfully, but with short range. Instantaneous micro black holes were created, vanishing a moment later. All mobile games were converted to pure heat. Free will was released. The shackles of determinism were removed from the universe. The possibility of escaping the blood-soaked fate mandated by the mobile games was now available.

With the death of mobile games, false time vanished, too. Time with no present, no past and no future no longer existed. The very fact that *Evo Gals* had once controlled the Earth was no longer real.

Time began a do-over. On a route where mobile games never gained control of anyone’s souls.

As her timeline faded, Youko returned to the universe. To Vayu’s soul.

“Vayu!”

“Are you... Youko? Are you... Sensei?”

“Yes! I am Youko and Sensei! I missed you so much. I’m so happy to see you!”

“I... I missed you, too.”

Their souls embraced. No matter what else happened, they would be together. No matter what happened, they would never forget each other's names. They promised each other this.

And their timeline grew hazy and disappeared.

Epilogue

Youko opened her eyes.

She looked around her. Her room looked just as it always did. Nothing strange about that.

Weird. It was like she was waking from a very long dream.

She felt like she was forgetting something. Something very important. Like she had something stuck between her teeth that wouldn't come out. She racked her brains for a while, but nothing shook loose.

Maybe staying up all night playing mobile games had given her nightmares.

Youko opened her phone. She reflectively tapped the *Evo Gals* icon, but it just gave her an error, refusing to launch. For some reason, she didn't feel at all disappointed. She actually felt rather relieved.

She was starving. She opened the fridge but it was empty. Oh well. She'd have to pop down to the store. She opened the door and found the sun was just rising. It was a beautiful sunrise. She drifted down the road, feeling good.

"Ow! Hey, watch where you're going!"

Her shoulder had bumped a woman drinking from a can of beer. This woman had rumpled short hair, and an androgynous face, like a prepubescent boy. It was kind of a cool look, really, but she must be really drunk, because her face was beet red all the way to the neck.

"What if something happened to me? That blood would be on your hands!"

Just hearing her voice annoyed Youko.

"Now, now, let's all stay calm here."

Fortunately, the woman's companion stepped in to soothe things over. She was rather tall. Maybe even over 180 centimeters. She had long black hair that traced a gentle wave all the way down her back, soft eyes, and seemed a really

peaceful person. She put her arms around the angry woman like she was calming a small child.

“Sorry. Once her fuse blows she loses all sense of proportion.”

The drunk woman swore under her breath but allowed herself to be pulled away. Both of them seemed familiar to Youko, somehow. She’d never met them before, but she felt like she had.

She was in a very odd mood today. Trying to shake it off, she did what she always did, and pulled her phone out of her pocket. The error was still on the screen. She tapped the screen a few more times as she walked.

“Look out!”

Thin arms wrapped around Youko’s waist, pulling her back. She was so shocked she dropped her phone.

A black shadow raced by, crushing the phone under it. The sheer weight of the vehicle ground the phone to dust. It was a six-ton truck, inches from her nose.

“Where were you looking? You almost died!” said the voice behind her. Youko knew that voice from somewhere. She just couldn’t remember where.

She turned around, and saw a petite girl, her arms still around Youko’s waist.

She’d almost died. As the realization hit her, fear came with it. Her knees buckled, and she nearly fell over.

“You can’t collapse here! Come on, on your feet!”

The girl held out her hand. She was wearing a blazer — she must be on her way to school. She had pale skin like porcelain, and the way the light hit it, it was almost blinding. Her hair was loosely bound at the back, but when it blew in the wind Youko could tell how clean it was. She felt suddenly ashamed that she hadn’t showered at all.

“Thanks,” she said, taking the hand, and rising to her feet. The feeling of déjà vu intensified. She’d never met this girl before, but for some reason she felt very important to her.

“Are you OK?” the girl said, peering into her face. “You’re crying.”

She was. Tears were streaming down her cheeks. Youko had no idea why. They were just quietly welling up with no signs of stopping.

“So are you,” she said, brushing her finger across the girl’s cheek. The girl was crying, too.

“Huh? Why... Am I...?” From her confused expression, Youko could tell the girl didn’t know why she was crying, either.

They stood there for a while staring at each other, letting the tears flow. Then, without another word, they embraced. Neither knew why, but both felt like they must never part again, no matter what happened.

Dark Seiyuu

1

The spaceship's sails had the aether winds behind them.

The sails were ten times wider than the ships themselves and swollen with the solar winds, accelerating. The sails gave off a blue light. Were you close enough, you could likely hear the whistle of the wind. Aether was a medium of light and sound, and as it struck the sails, it oscillated.

The ships were nearing their destination, Earth, so they moved off the aether winds, decelerating.

The Earth glittered like a rainbow.

As the Earth rotated at 1700 kph, in orbit at 100,000 kph, it was struck by the aether winds that flowed through the void of space, generating friction. The thermosphere, 80 kilometers above the surface, was irradiated with strong aether vibrations — light. The rotational friction gave rise to a high-energy purple light around the equator, but towards the poles the energy weakened, causing redshift. As a result, seen from space, the Earth appeared covered in rainbow-like stripes.

In one of those stripes, at a place that glittered like an emerald — on the surface, at 35 degrees latitude — in the forests of Ichikawa in Chiba Prefecture, a murder was about to take place.

"DIEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!"

A tall human with a ponytail was trying to kill a smaller human with short hair. The former was the seiyuu Akane Yomokura (26), while the latter was also a seiyuu, Hinagiku Nakayama (19). Akane swung a knife. Hinagiku was so shocked she fell to the ground, and as a result, avoided a fatal wound.

“Ow! A-Akane-san? What are you doing!?” Hinagiku shrieked. Her laryngeal sac, an organ unique to seiyuu, quivered. This was a lump of red flesh that dangled below the throat. About the size of two knuckles, it was covered in countless reddish-brown zit-like protrusions. Hinagiku’s excitement made the flesh lump bulge, and the protrusions swell. The laryngeal sac was an organ that made aether vibrate. This was a seiyuu’s life. It contained a ganglion so large it was called the second brain; it operated independently, and even without direct commands from the brain prime, it would sound the most complex voices, making the surrounding aether shiver.

Hinagiku’s laryngeal sac grew engorged, turning red. The wrinkled protrusions were now swollen into thin tubes, like fingers reaching in all directions. Fluid coursed through the tubes, refracting her voices, sounding it as a complex set of aether vibrations. The aether fluctuations became waves that were released from the laryngeal sac into the world outside.

Akane was within kissing distance when Hinagiku’s laryngeal sac fired a maser beam.

The voice Hinagiku sounded was the frequency of the electromagnetic beams masers produce. Electromagnetic beams were aether waves, and by vibrating their voices seiyuu could fire beams. Maser beams collide with water molecules, vibrating them, and raise their temperature instantaneously. Struck head on by one made being roasted into rare steak inescapable.

And at this distance, it was impossible to miss. All she had left to do was to finish off the would-be-murderer as she writhed in pain, clutching her scorched head.

Except nothing happened.

“Well done, Hinagiku-chan. You’re as skilled as they say. Unfortunately for you, I’m even better!”

Akane’s laryngeal sac was swollen, too. She had guessed that Hinagiku’s sac vibration would fire a maser beam. Her own sac had produced a sound to neuter that. Sound and light were both aether vibrations, so if you applied a frequency that reversed the waveform, it was possible to cancel them out.

Akane’s fingers got a grip on Hinagiku’s tongue. Hinagiku clamped her jaw

shut, trying to bite those fingers off, but the knife in Akane's other hand was faster. The sharp edge of that well-polished stainless blade invaded Hinagiku's mouth, snipping off that soft flesh. Hinagiku's face twisted with pain and despair. The tongue had an unusually high concentration of nerves in it. Ten thousand nerves were sending signals to the brain that cells had been destroyed.

Without a tongue, a seiyuu was powerless. The laryngeal sac was now useless. Almost drowning on the blood from her severed tongue, Hinagiku tried to make the sac vibrate, but was unable to make a coherent sound.

Akane pulled her knife from Hinagiku's mouth. Hinagiku was still alive. Her eyes were wide open, and fear was on her face. The sharp stainless tip approached the left eye. That was the knife's next target. Her dilated pupils displayed just how abject Hinagiku's terror was. But this did not slow the approach of Akane's knife at all. The blood-drenched knife slid into the eye.

Once pierced, eyeballs are flimsy things. Their tensile strength makes the hole pop, and the entire membrane ruptures. A tiny explosion occurred, and pus gushed out. Hinagiku's face was greasy with blood and pus, but this didn't concern Akane; she moved her knife and popped the other eye.

All that was left were two hollow, deflated half-spheres crisscrossed with countless capillaries.

Hinagiku slumped to the ground. She was on the brink of death. Meanwhile, her laryngeal sac was shaking violently. The independent ganglion was still very much alive.

Akane stroked Hinagiku's laryngeal sac lovingly. It was healthy and alive. The body was dying, but they weren't fussed at all. She'd loved this sac the moment she set eyes on it.

She took out a new, undirtied knife, and placed the blade at the root of the sac. She slid the knife across the flesh as if caressing it. At first, the blood oozing out was quite dark, but soon that was washed away by a flood of bright red blood. Hinagiku's still beating heart caused the blood to gush out in waves.

Even detached from the body, the laryngeal sac vibrated, desperate to make her voice sound. Akane held the mass gently in both hands, carrying it to a

cooler.

As a finishing touch, she stabbed a knife in one of the vacant eye sockets, pushing it back. The knife plunged through Hinagiku's eye, down the nerves, and into her brain, destroying her brain tissue. Now there was no chance of her ever recovering. Once brain tissue was damaged it could never be rebuilt exactly the same way. With the knife in it, the brain tissue lost stability, and began oozing out of the eye socket.

Akane had achieved her goal. The scene of the crime was a forest, and there were no signs of anyone else around, but she had to dispose of the body quickly. If the clouds parted and the sun came out there was no telling who'd see the body.

Akane took off her jacket. On her upper arm was a writhing red splotch. It was a tumor the size of a tangerine, and it was slowly pulsing, like it was breathing. Its movements were growing a little faster.

Akane took off more clothes, stripping down to her underwear. The tumor on her arm was not the only one; she had them on her upper belly, on her side, and on each thigh. Ten tumors in all. By now they were vibrating too fast for the eye to see.

Akane wrapped her arms around Hinagiku's body. The shorter girl's head came up to Akane's chest. She'd died only a minute ago, but her body temperature had already dropped a lot, and she was cold to the touch.

Akane held the body tight, making sure all her tumors were in contact with it. The tumors looked ready to burst, and there was a light shining across them. She put her full weight on the body, as if rubbing the light against it.

In time Hinagiku's cold body began warming up to a temperature much hotter than it had ever been when she was alive. Temperatures that would turn meat into steak, and steak into charcoal.

The charcoal served to fertilize the plants, so nothing was wasted. She was doing her part to keep the city green.

When Hinagiku was completely carbonized, the sky began to clear. The sky above was covered with a strong bluish-green glow. If you went north to Ibaraki

Prefecture, the glow grew greener; south to Tokyo Harbor it leaned blue.

The inverted city of Yokohama floated above her.

Against the background of the green sky rocked a floating ocean. In the coastal Minato Mirai, a large Ferris wheel revolved, the clock displayed on the side of it now reversed. The Landmark Tower dangled nearby. While tiny, you could just make out the red cars of the Keihin Express. A roller coaster was hurtling around the tracks at Hakkeijima Sea Paradise. At the Zoorasia animal preserve, giraffes were reaching their necks up to eat. All of this was an illusion created by light refracting off discrepancies in the aether density, the aether mirage.

There was a higher concentration of aether in the upper atmosphere. As the quantity of air in each atmospheric layer increased, the amount of aether grew correspondingly thin. Since light was aether vibrations, the higher the concentration of aether the faster the speed of light. The discrepancy between the speed of light in the upper atmosphere and near the surface gave light a convex curve, creating the mirage. Light headed from the surface towards the upper atmosphere traced a long curve, returning back to the surface a considerable distance away. When humans see light, they perceive it as coming from directly ahead, which creates the illusion of a landscape floating upside-down in the sky.

Since the Earth rotated, aether was caught by the Coriolis force, and this motion created the aether winds. The aether winds stirred up the light, causing it to bend. This was why Yokohama appeared above her, despite being to the south-west. The reason Akane had been concerned about the weather was the aether mirage. You could kill someone in a remote location, but if it was reflected in an aether mirage you might as well be in public.

Brushing Hinagiku's charred remains off her body, Akane put her clothes back on. She cradled the cooler to her, grinning. She'd taken another step towards becoming the ultimate seiyuu.

*

The Great Seiyuu Age — there was a period in time that earned itself that name. Seiyuu became the stars of the day, the hopes of humanity — all envied

their laryngeal sacs. Seiyuu of the day were in demand for far more than just their main job — they were called on for pin-ups, modeling, singing, and streaming video performances.

The history of seiyuu was a long one. One theory placed the origins 500,000 years ago, as early as the birth of homo sapiens. That being said, seiyuu of the past were natural seiyuu, and did not have laryngeal sacs displayed outside the bodies. It was unlikely they could do more than gather a few dozen together to light a bonfire.

The origins of seiyuu evolutionary theory and the biological mechanisms involved were shrouded in mystery, even today. The best guess anyone had been able to make was that the laryngeal sac had been the key to everything. Natural seiyuu could not be identified as such from appearance alone, but they, too, possessed a laryngeal sac the size of a thumb on the interior of their throats. The presence of the laryngeal sac alone granted them control of aether vibrations.

While the principle behind it was unclear, a method was discovered to expand this ability. The Human Genome Project carried out some 270 years ago discovered a gene that could grow the laryngeal sac. In theory, if the sac was enlarged, the seiyuu's ability would grow by leaps and bounds. It only took twenty years before genetic engineering developed enough to make this theory reality.

Seiyuu genes were exclusive to human beings, and creating enhanced laryngeal sacs involved the birth of designer babies. Some bioethical concerns were raised, but they were defeated by a wave of economic practicality. Effectively, a detailed examination of seiyuu activities revealed that they were able to get around the law of energy conservation. Use of seiyuu made it possible, in principle, to create a perpetual motion machine. Propaganda machines went into overdrive, announcing that the next century would be the age of the seiyuu. The Seiyuu Revolution would be as dramatic as the Industrial one. Seiyuu would lead humanity forward.

Thus, the first generation of artificial seiyuu was born. But their abilities were weaker than anticipated, and their endurance poor. Activating their abilities required lengthy periods of concentration. From the perspective of value and

stability, even if they could break the law of energy conservation, they were not worth using for power generation.

The field that did find uses for them was the space industry. Since seiyuu could control aether vibrations, they could manipulate sound, light, and a number of other forces. One of these forces was gravity control — something not possible with any other device. Calculations showed that use of this ability would make escaping the gravitation sphere far more cost-effective. The space industry had always been prohibitively expensive, but the introduction of seiyuu made things considerably cheaper.

Fifty years after the discovery of the seiyuu gene, gravity control spaceships were exploring the solar system, flown by seiyuu pilots — seiyuu were finally stars. In light of which, egged on by designer baby industry advertisements, parents everywhere altered their children's genes, turning them into seiyuu.

In response to demand, two programs began, both aimed at elevating seiyuu powers. The first was the Legend Class Project, a simplistic approach that attempted to enhance seiyuu abilities by making the laryngeal sac larger. The quality of seiyuu they targeted were referred to as Legend Class, and they insisted these seiyuu would even be able to create antimatter.

The other was the Seiyuu Transistor Program. A seiyuu transistor was a supplementary system designed to work with existing seiyuu abilities. They introduced the seiyuu gene into gorillas, chimpanzees, orangutans, and other anthropoid apes, and when they grew laryngeal sacs, they harvested these, combined them, and created biomachines. They called them seiyuu transistors. The plan was that by merging multiple seiyuu into a single transistor, the power output would be the equivalent of having one giant seiyuu.

Both plans more or less succeeded, and seiyuu opened the doors to travel outside the solar system. This was the dawn of the Great Seiyuu Age. Thanks to seiyuu, mankind began spreading through the galaxy in earnest.

Physics proved no impediment. Physics-based speed limits like the speed of sound or light speed were dependent on the density of aether. In the atmosphere, where aether was thin, 100,000 kph was all they could manage, but in the open stretches of the solar system, where aether was much thicker,

they could easily top 1,080,000,000 kph. Once they entered interstellar regions, that jumped to 10,000,000,000,000 kph. Once they made it into space there were no practical impediments to the spread of humanity.

Except for one thing, that is. Mankind made an unexpected and disappointing discovery. There were almost no planets they could safely colonize. To be strictly accurate, planets themselves were far and few between. The law of universal gravitation did not seem to be all that universal. Mankind found very few sectors where gravity worked like our solar system. The aether flow caused any number of places where dust and gas gathered — a.k.a. aether deposits — but it was extremely rare for that matter to mutually attract and form a stable celestial body. There must be more to gravity than previously suspected.

On top of this came more bad news. As the seiyuu investigated the universe outside, they discovered that our solar system lay inside a massive aether deposit. A spiral-shaped deposit a quintillion kilometers in diameter, this was named the Milky Way. The problem was that mankind had no way of leaving the Milky Way. Because the gas and dust in the Milky Way crowded out the aether, the aether density within the Milky Way was lower than it was outside. Much like the difference between the Earth's atmosphere and the solar system, and the solar system and the interstellar realms. The higher the concentration of aether, the higher the energy of light. Thus far, seiyuu's control over aether vibration had been able to defend against the powerful light flying around the galaxy. However, light outside the reaches of the Milky Way had energy far beyond their capabilities, and the seiyuu were helpless against it. Ships that ventured beyond the Milky Way were instantly vaporized by the intense light that filled that void.

Because of this, a hundred years after the Great Seiyuu Age began, three quarters of the total human population remained within our original solar system. The age of the frontier spirit was quickly being replaced with claustrophobia.

At this time, the status of seiyuu went into freefall. The major genetic engineering conglomerates used their patents on specific seiyuu genomes to place limitations on certain seiyuu's reproductive freedom. They established legal precedent in courts to back up these demands.

This led directly to the War of Seiyuu Independence. Seiyuu whose rights had been encroached upon rebelled, with the Legend Class seiyuu in the lead. The overwhelming power of the Legend Class seiyuu allowed the rebels to claim an advantage initially, but lack of resources on the seiyuu side led to the rebellion being squashed inside of a month. Even seiyuu can't do much without food. The survivors called themselves the Free Seiyuu and set out towards the dangerous heart of the galaxy, where mankind had not yet dared venture. The seiyuu left behind found themselves even more restricted.

The technology to create Legend Class seiyuu was banned, and even the less powerful seiyuu found their rights curtailed. The Seiyuu Surveillance Society, subordinate to the genetic engineering industry and the agency alliance, monitored the seiyuu's lives so heavily they dictated which shampoo they were allowed to use. As romance with the opposite gender might lead to genetic spreading, it, too, was verboten. Upon reaching a certain age, seiyuu were married to a partner arranged by the Seiyuu Surveillance Society and forced to start rearing the next generation of seiyuu. Any who resisted were severely penalized by the Seiyuu Police. By this point, seiyuu were no longer human — they were merely parts for spaceships, raised like livestock.

Akane was born forty years after the War of Seiyuu Independence, so to her this was all in the past. Yet when she first learned this history, she'd been livid. She wanted to break free of the desperate conditions her kind found themselves in, no matter what it took. This desire swelled within her until it became delusions of grandeur — she was convinced only she could change the world, only she could save it. She needed power to be this savior. She had to become the ultimate seiyuu. But Akane had not been born a Legend Class seiyuu, and so no matter how much she practiced, there was a limit to her ability.

When Akane learned of this limit, she spent some time as a prisoner of despair. However, by changing her approach, she got it together again. Rather than use her own laryngeal sac exclusively, she began borrowing sacs from other seiyuu, transplanting them to herself. For that purpose, she had killed ten other seiyuu. It had been a tough decision, but now each of them was a part of her — Akane Yomokura, the savior, the ultimate seiyuu. She was sure their

deaths had been repaid, and their souls lay at rest.

And today, Akane had stolen Hinagiku Nakayama's laryngeal sac. It was her eleventh victim. Akane's body would only allow one more transplanted sac. She had been searching for the strongest one she could, certain that it was her duty to make that sac a part of her own body.

II

“Good morning! It’s Akane Yomokura.”

“Good morning!”

Greetings echoed through the studio. Seiyuu greetings were always ‘Good morning,’ whether it was noon or night.

They were about to commence flight operations. Seiyuu took their positions, placing microphones at their laryngeal sacs.

The natural seiyuu of ancient times often worked as actors and singers. This was because they had a direct grasp of the true nature of sound, aether, and were able to make their voices beautiful, whether spoken or sung. This is why the kanji in ‘seiyuu’ mean ‘voice’ and ‘skilled.’ The occupation originally referred to actors who did ADR recording for anime, acting exclusively with their voices — it did not refer to people with aether control abilities. Many ‘seiyuu’ voice actors also had the ability to manipulate aether, but the two meanings of the word are fundamentally distinct. However, once the anime industry collapsed, and the original meaning of ‘seiyuu’ was no longer a viable occupation, the definition of the word changed. Just as the word ‘penguin’ originally referred to the great auk, but after the great auk went extinct it began being used for a different species. Modern seiyuu occasionally do accept acting work, but this is exclusively a side gig.

The work modern artificial seiyuu do is nothing like what the word originally referred to. But the jargon around the occupation retains the flavor of that ancient line of work. For example, the onsite manager on a ship piloted by seiyuu is traditionally referred to as the ‘director.’

Additionally, before throwing themselves into aether control, modern seiyuu often share stories and songs, just as their predecessors did. They use these to induce a trance state in which they manipulate the aether. However, the words modern seiyuu use to place themselves in this trance state are hardly ordinary;

to an outside observer they would seem like a string of meaningless sounds. The main thing learned at seiyuu training schools is this occupational language. Those privileged to hear it feel as if they have encountered the unknown. As if a mythological archetype has stimulated their unconscious.

This was one reason why seiyuu could not be replaced with machines. Vibrating aether required the ability to understand unquantifiable emotions and feelings contained within these stories. Anatomically speaking, it had been proven that the laryngeal sac had a great deal of neurological connections to Wenicke's area, the region of the brain that controlled language; it was assumed that this was related to the songs and myths that lay at the root of all language.

Within the group of seiyuu gathered today, Akane held the highest rank. Seiyuu ranks were determined by their ability. The lowest ranked trainees, the junior class, had abilities scarcely larger than a natural seiyuu with hair on it; without a seiyuu transistor it was all they could do to raise the temperature of water in a kettle by ten degrees or emit a soft glow. Above them was the C Class, young seiyuu finally allowed to assist aboard spaceships. This level could boil water in a kettle on their own, produce ultraviolet light, and a few dozen of them with a transistor could control the gravity aboard a very small spaceship. Next were the mid-level seiyuu, the B Class — this was Akane's current rank. These were the main staff on civilian spaceships, and a few of them with a transistor could provide gravity control to basically any spaceship. On their own, they could output enough energy to power the appliances in an average home. The top of the profession were the veteran seiyuu, the A Class; most of these were official seiyuu piloting official ships, or working for science labs powering particle seiyuu accelerators. At that level, with a transistor they could fly a small ship single-handedly and produce high energy radiation like gamma waves. Some could even handle gravity manipulation on their own for short periods of time.

Akane was classified as B Class, but she was sure her actual ability was on the high side of A Class. One reason she hadn't raised her rank was the frequency of work. High ranks mean higher wages, but since the company's needs were met by B Class seiyuu, they weren't willing to pay for higher ranked ones. The result

would be far less work coming her way.

A was not the highest class, technically. Legend Class outranked them. This tier had literally become the stuff of legends. Nearly all members had taken part in the War of Seiyuu Independence and fled the solar system. These days the seiyuu agency alliance kept a tight lid on information about them, but rumor had it their laryngeal sacs were larger than they were, they could fuse with the spaceship, and it was even possible for them to produce antimatter — they were basically wizards. They were Akane's ultimate goal, the ultimate seiyuu.

Gathered today were two junior class, five C class, and five B class seiyuu. Before work began, manners dictated that subordinates greet their superiors, so the other seiyuu lined up in a row in front of Akane. She had to respond to this, which meant she didn't get a chance to relax, either. Neither side benefited from this custom in any way. All it did was waste time until it was time for the ship to launch.

"All right, time for the opening. Positions."

This voyage was a short one from the Earth to the Moon. It would take less than five hours. The opening was one of the toughest parts of navigation; this was the process of making the ship fly from the surface into outer space. Gravity was one of aether's waves, so if you produced aether waves that countered the phase you could create anti-gravity. It was common to use a song for this. All seiyuu would sing an aggressively uptempo number, placing themselves in a trance state so they could concentrate on the aether vibrations and counteract the Earth's gravity.

Twelve seiyuu were singing at the instructions of the director. Aether vibrations amplified by the seiyuu transistor broadcast outside the ship via the aether amps. Gravity was canceled out, and the 500 meter lump of metal began to float. As it did, the engine began to hum. Ships that left all propulsion to the seiyuu were becoming more common, but there were still many hybrid ship designs using traditional engines.

As Akane shook the aether, she always heard a voice. One only Akane could hear, a soft voice, the meaning of its words unclear.

She'd heard that voice as long as she could remember, every time she

sounded the aether. At first, when she listened closely to it, it left butterflies in her stomach. Now she still had no clue what it was but had long since stopped paying it any attention.

The Earth's atmosphere has four primary layers. From the top down they were the thermosphere, the mesosphere, the stratosphere, and the troposphere. The thermosphere is where friction between the Earth's atmosphere and the aether of outer space occurs, so it had the highest temperature. The lower you get in the mesosphere the lower that temperature becomes, but in the stratosphere the temperature starts rising again. This is because the ozone layer absorbs the ultraviolet rays that pass through the thermosphere.

The ship easily passed through the troposphere, stratosphere and mesosphere, entering the thermosphere. The aether density increased, and the blue-green light grew stronger. At this height, the Earth's rotation left aether winds blowing from east to west with no interference from the atmosphere. Light from upwind had stronger energy and a blueshift, while light from downwind had weaker energy and a redshift. That left the east side sky blue and the west yellow. At altitudes above the thermosphere the aether grew so thick and the light and sound energy so strong it required sunglasses and earplugs to protect the eye and ears. Even with those there was no escaping the shrill whine generated by the friction between the atmosphere and the aether. Rates of mental illness were quite high among seiyuu and other ship crew members; possibly because they were forced to listen to this noise 24/7.

"Through the thermosphere, opening complete," the director said, outside the booth.

Akane lowered her mic. From this point on flight was possible with only a few seiyuu.

Akane left the studio. A staff member said, "Akane-san, you're wanted in the cabin." It was common in the industry for seiyuu to provide in-flight entertainment to the passengers on board. This was important enough that passengers would select flights based on the seiyuu on board. How often a seiyuu was employed depended on her face, figure, and social media following. No matter how good you were at actually flying the planes, if the passengers

didn't like you, you'd get no work. Akane was well aware just how messed up that was.

For now, she put her thoughts aside and focused on the job at hand. Akane and her coworkers filed into the cabin. The others were all junior class, so it was probably best if she handled the customary briefing.

"Thank you for choosing Star Flash Company's Earth/Moon shuttle service today. We have exited the Earth's atmosphere and are currently in transit to the Moon. You can see a view of the Earth on screen. Isn't it beautiful? These lights are generated by aether friction. Aether attracted to the Earth's gravity is colliding with the Earth's atmosphere."

As the ship rose higher, the entire Earth came into view on the cabin screen. It was filled with all colors of the rainbow, glowing light neon.

"As I'm sure you're all aware, aether is the medium for all sound, light, and particles. The origins of aether theory go all the way back to the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, and the theory of four elements. He believed that all things start out as a single matter called the *prima materia*, and that by applying the qualities hot, cold, wet, and dry you created the four elements of fire, air, water, and earth. Hot and dry together create fire, hot and wet create air, cold and wet create water, and cold and dry create earth. Hot and cold, and dry and wet were incompatible with each other and could not be combined. Additionally, Aristotle proposed a fifth element named aether, one that would control the heavenly bodies, and which he believed to be pure *prima materia*. Modern physics is based on this idea of the four element theory. What originally exists is just aether, and by applying different qualities to it, we get all types of matter. These days the four qualities Aristotle proposed are understood to be aether frequencies. The frequencies alone apply qualities, and the combination of different frequencies creates the different forces of sounds, lights, and particles that form the world around us."

"But aether isn't the only theory," one of the passengers interrupted. "There's also the theory of Fields!"

Fields. A pretty old-fashioned concept, but apparently some people still believed in it. Unfortunately, these ideas had fallen out of fashion in modern

physics, and Akane was not well versed in them.

Akane thought for a few moments, considering how to respond. Fortunately, a more knowledgeable passenger stepped in, breaking the silence.

“Fields? The idea that there’s a field for everything that describes values for those qualities, and that as long as there is space, there is a field, no medium is required? That’s certainly one way of looking at things, but the calculations required to show how multiple fields interact produced infinities, making it functionally useless to calculate anything.”

Akane accepted this help, cleared her throat, and continued her speech.

“The vibrations caused by the friction between aether and the Earth cause the quality of light to be attached to it, creating the aether luminescence. All life on Earth uses this luminescence as the basis for our energy. Throughout the Milky Way, it’s rare to find anywhere with gravity this stable. All of us here are quite lucky. If gravity weren’t set up exactly the way it is, life would never have started.”

“Um, what happens to aether that falls onto the Earth?” a passenger asked.

Google it, Akane thought, but she gave the textbook response.

“That’s a good question. Apparently, that’s one of the biggest problems in modern physics. We know that aether attracted by gravity must be entering the Earth’s atmosphere, but the quantity of aether in the atmosphere is far lower than anticipated. In other words, there’s a lot of aether unaccounted for. It appears to be contradicting the law of conservation of mass. This vanishing aether is one of the great mysteries of physics. Although there is a theory that says the vanishing aether is being converted into gravitational energy.”

“The three great mysteries of modern physics are the origins of gravity, the vanishing aether, and dark matter, right?”

“Wow, you sure know your stuff!”

It seemed like this passenger couldn’t just hold his tongue, so Akane let a slightly phony note creep into her voice. She’d been doing this a while and could handle a crowd like this in her sleep.

“Not only is the aether disappearing a mystery, the source of gravity is also a big problem. Before the Great Seiyuu Age, there was the theory of universal gravitation, which suggested that all mass was a source of gravity, but these days we know that the gravity frequency is an extremely complicated one, and not one that easily occurs. Sectors where gravity exists do seem to comply with the law of universal gravitation, though. Additionally, there are constructs like the solar system or the Milky Way that form around the gravitational pull of a central celestial object, but simulations run on our solar system show that aether friction should have caused the Earth to fall into the sun after a few hundred thousand years. But physics has proven that at least five trillion years have passed since the Earth was born. To solve this contradiction, physicists have proposed the existence in the solar system of a gravitational source other than the observed celestial bodies — this is what is commonly referred to as dark matter. This hypothesis states that undetectable, unknown dark matter is scattered throughout the solar system, maintaining a gravitational balance that prevents the planets from falling into the sun. However, a major criticism of this hypothesis is that the distribution of this dark matter is not sufficiently arbitrary.”

“Oh, also, isn’t it a big problem that seiyuu can break the law of conservation of energy?”

“That’s correct. Lately some people are including that problem and calling it the four great mysteries. As a seiyuu myself, I’m honored to be included. But maybe just a little embarrassed...”

Akane concluded her lecture, and the junior class seiyuu began handed out drinks to the passengers. This was their daily routine.

“Ugh... I’m exhausted...”

They’d been to the moon and back, and Akane was home again. Chugging a Strong Zero to banish the fatigue of work, she lay back on her bed. She was not in the mood for anything active, so she turned the TV on and let it play whatever. An announcer was speaking.

“Five years ago, the theft of the unique small spacecraft *The Black Swan* made

headlines, yet even today the location of it has yet to be discovered. Today, the Space Security Board announced they are increasing the reward offered for any information.”

On screen was an image of an acute isosceles triangle in flight. Akane vaguely remembered it being stolen from a military base and creating a bit of a stir five years ago. It looked pretty powerful, so she briefly imagined herself flying around in it. If it was still missing, maybe it had been taken outside the solar system?

The screen changed. Now it was showing a group of gorillas being slaughtered. Gnarly-looking soldiers in gas masks were attacking the gorillas with flame throwers.

“The gorilla seiyuu rebellion that started in Nigeria last week appears to have been successfully put down by the combined forces of the military and the private security firm, the Rise Detective Agency.”

The uprising of gorilla seiyuu at the Nigerian laryngeal sac factory had been a major focus of the media the last few days. Anthropoid ape farms were still big business. In Africa they used gorillas and chimps, in Indonesia they used orangutans, but they were all raised in vast quantities to be turned into transistor parts.

Even if you introduced the seiyuu genes into anthropoid apes, they had a very low chance of developing a laryngeal sac. Most were deformed and died before birth. In recent years, selective breeding had resulted in gorillas that had a higher chance of growing laryngeal sacs, but as a side effect, they were more intelligent, and had used their seiyuu abilities to start a revolt. Akane had been secretly cheering them on, but they were just gorillas, and had been no match for modern weaponry.

I’ve just got to become the ultimate seiyuu myself, she thought, taking another long pull on her Strong Zero.

The TV screen switched to an image of a building belching smoke.

“More news on that terrorist attack yesterday morning on the Tokyo University Seiyuu Genetics Laboratory. A statement purportedly from the individual responsible has been released on the aethernet. According to it, the

motive for the attack was, “There are too many seiyuu.” The note also says, “Seiyuu, listen to the voice,” but the meaning is unclear. The culprit identifies themselves only as the Dark Seiyuu. Security cameras at the scene have captured someone believed to be responsible, and the police are asking for any information...”

Akane had stopped listening to the announcer’s voice. Her eyes were glued to the TV screen. The security footage showed a woman, not very tall. She had a black hood on, so her face was hidden from view, but the laryngeal sac showed she was definitely a seiyuu.

Akane had seen a lot of different seiyuu, so she knew. This was a very well-shaped sac.

The color and size were flawless. This seiyuu was very strong. Top class strength.

If she could get her hands on that laryngeal sac, what more could she ask for? Akane imagined transplanting that to her body, and knew she’d finally be the ultimate seiyuu.

But how could she get in touch with this Dark Seiyuu? She had no idea. Did she have to give up on ever obtaining that sac? She sighed and turned her attention back to the news.

“What do you make of this, ‘Seiyuu, listen to the voice?’”

“We believe it to be some sort of coded message. They’re most likely trying to contact someone through the media.”

Seiyuu, listen to the voice... Akane had heard a voice before. She had no idea what it was, and couldn’t make it out, but that voice definitely made emotions boil up within her.

Was this the voice the Dark Seiyuu meant? Probably not. The delusion that everything happening in the world connected to her was something best abandoned in adolescence.

But that evening the Dark Seiyuu’s laryngeal sac was spinning around inside Akane’s head, and she couldn’t fall asleep. Eventually she gave up and spent all night writing things on social media, not really thinking about it. Before long she

found herself talking about the voice she'd heard, ever since she was born. The voice that sounded like it came through several different walls, too muffled to make out, but if she listened closely she'd feel a tightness in her chest.

III

With the advent of the Seiyuu Surveillance Society, seiyuu lost all privacy. They were duty-bound to submit biological and positional data in real time via social media. Over time, seiyuu began publicizing information beyond that of their own accord. The more info they put out, the more it made them seem harmless, the more it showed they were up to nothing suspicious, and if you didn't do these things you'd never get popular and be able to support yourself.

One thing this led to was a culture of yuri-baiting among the female seiyuu. "Yuri" referred to friendship and romance between two women. Same-sex relationships, as long as they had no impact on future arranged marriages, were approved by the Seiyuu Surveillance Society, and even encouraged as a way to let off steam. And it had a direct impact on popularity, so they formed parties with coworkers, and made it seem like they were close. These days, if you wanted to make it as a female seiyuu, you had to master the art of yuri-baiting.

Akane, of course, yuri-baited with the best of them. She was currently partnered with Sachii Amamiya, a girl five years her junior. They'd both graduated from the same training school, but it seemed Sachii took things far more seriously, and her feelings bordered on devotion.

"Sachii and I have a date at the banana gator garden! ≡"

Akane posted this to her social media, along with a picture of her and Sachii arm in arm in front of a goofy alligator mascot.

This was Higashiizu in Shizuoka, an onsen town at the tip of the Izu Peninsula. One of the main tourist attractions was the Atagawa Tropical and Alligator Garden. It was a conservatory kept warm using heat from the onsen, allowing visitors to see both bananas and gators year-round.

The two of them had taken a train here, taking advantage of some time off to rest their bones in the onsen waters. There was still time before they could check in, so they'd decided to check out the gators to kill some time.

“Senpai, let’s go in!” Sachii said, tugging Akane’s hand.

Sachii was short but curvy. She wore her hair in a short bob that bounced around a lot, which made Akane want to comb it for her. Her T-shirt had a picture of a female seiyuu with long silver hair and a cardigan on it. It was an early picture of Suzuka Himori, a seiyuu active during the War of Seiyuu Independence. As a seiyuu, her abilities had been on the low end of A Class, but her heroic work as a ship doctor had made her a bit of an icon in the counterculture.

Sachii was pulling Akane as hard as she could, but she was so tiny there wasn’t much force behind it. Her character was your classic ditz, and the more innocent she acted the more fans and staff liked her. Even at training school she’d been a big one for hugs.

The Garden had three main buildings, the first of which was a large dome that housed the gators. Inside, they were met by a wave of hot, humid air, and the sound of a man-made waterfall.

“I can’t remember the last time I saw gators!” Sachii ran off towards the tanks, but she didn’t let go of Akane’s hand, so she looked like a dog straining on its leash. “Ah ha ha ha! Gators are so lazy! They never move at all!”

As excited as only a warm-blooded animal could be, Sachii jeered at the cold-blooded reptiles. When Akane let go of her hand she started dashing around like a dog playing fetch and was soon out of sight.

But that heart-warming spectacle was soon overwritten by a thunderous noise.

All the glass in the conservatory started rattling. Akane looked outside and saw a black isosceles triangle landing outside. It was about five meters long, and Akane recognized it instantly. It was the unique small spacecraft she’d seen on the news a week before — *The Black Swan*.

The Black Swan’s hatch opened.

A short girl in a black hood and cloak emerged, a laryngeal sac at her throat. Akane would know that sac anywhere. It was the same one from the security footage the news had played.

This was the Dark Seiyuu.

Akane immediately headed towards the door, but the Dark Seiyuu stepped into the conservatory first. Seeing the real thing up close, she was even more sure of this laryngeal sac's quality.

"There you are," the Dark Seiyuu said. Her voice sounded tense. "You're Akane Yomokura, right? You wrote on social media about the voice you hear."

"Yes, that's definitely me." Akane, for her part, was flustered by this sudden development. She quite forgot to play nice and let her actual personality show. "Quite a dramatic entrance for a few rambling posts. What are you, an online stalker?"

"I don't have much time. Let me test to see if you can really hear the voice!"

With that, the Dark Seiyuu immediately attacked. Her laryngeal sac swelled up and sounded a high-energy laser beam. Akane hastily vibrated the beam's counter frequency, canceling it out.

"You wanna fight me, then? You got a lotta nerve! I'll kick your ass and take that sac off you!"

The eleven sacs on Akane's body swelled up. Blue lightning crackled from all of them. The lightning hovered in the air, running across the surface of her body.

"Interesting... You've transplanted sacs to your body. And not ape ones, but proper human sacs. I'd heard there'd been a number of seiyuu gone missing. Guess that was your doing."

"I do what I have to, to get stronger. Whatever it takes!" Akane put her hands up, ready to fight. "I've been collecting the best seiyuu sacs around, making myself stronger. You're the last one. I kill you, I'll be the ultimate seiyuu!"

Blue lightning crackling all over her, Akane swung a fist at the Dark Seiyuu. This was the ultimate martial arts, Seiyuu Karate — her own invention. Vibrating the aether, generating a current, creating plasma, and burning anyone it came in contact with. Her moves were several times more powerful than traditional karate.

The Dark Seiyuu blocked Akane's fist easily with both hands. Seemed like she had some martial arts training herself. But this was where Seiyuu Karate showed its true value. The electric current and plasma were absorbed into her opponent's body.

Except — no smell of burning flesh came drifting through the air. The blue lightning passed through the Dark Seiyuu's body, affecting only the floor beneath her.

Apparently she was controlling the flow of aether and redirecting the current.

"You're strong," Akane said, both surprised and elated by her opponent's strength.

She felt like the Dark Seiyuu was grinning back.

"Hey! You! Hands off my senpai!"

Sachii tackled the Dark Seiyuu from her blind spot. She'd spotted some suspicious interloper attacking her beloved senpai and run in without a second thought.

But the Dark Seiyuu didn't even budge. Instead, Sachii went flying, landing in the alligator pen. She must have manipulated gravity. Seiyuu who could control gravity solo, sans transistor, were rare these days, even among A Class seiyuu. That alone proved her opponent's power.

Akane put some distance between them. Gravity manipulation was exhausting work. This was her chance to finish her opponent off. She reached both arms out, vibrating the laryngeal sacs she'd implanted on them. An aether wave spread out around her, filling the conservatory with rainbow light. A blue sphere of light appeared between her hands. Air turned to plasma by high-temperature electric current.

"Die!"

Pulsing with an intense blue light, the sphere shot towards the Dark Seiyuu. She'd created a flow of aether around both arms, generating a current, and used those coils to accelerate the plasma. This was Akane's ultimate move, the Seiyu Plasma Gun.

But again, her opponent was uninjured. The plasma struck an invisible wall inches from the Dark Seiyuu and was deflected.

“An aether barrier. If that surprises you, you’re still an amateur.”

An aether barrier. Creating an artificial aether density discrepancy to reflect light, sound, or shockwaves. Wavelengths were affected by density, which meant you could use density changes to alter incoming wavelengths — that idea had led to the development of this technique. It had been widely used during the War of Seiyuu Independence, but Akane had never imagined anyone still in the solar system could use it without a transistor.

“Is that all the attacks you got?” the Dark Seiyuu asked. “Then I guess it’s my turn.”

Akane got ready to neutralize, but the attack came from a direction she wasn’t expecting. She felt herself suddenly pulled forcibly backwards. The floor tilted up, turning into a sheer cliff. No, wait. Gravity had changed direction, localized around her. The Dark Seiyuu was controlling gravity. But knowing that didn’t help her recover her balance. Akane was sent into an undignified roll.

And as she rolled, the Dark Seiyuu kicked Akane in the head. Blood sprayed from her nose. She tried to get up, but it was like concrete had her pinned immobile to the ground. Gravity had been increased several times for her alone. She could see little bundles of light dancing around the corners of her vision. The gravity was so much stronger here that blood wasn’t getting to her brain. She could barely breathe. Her pulse was racing like a madman but her circulation stagnated, her body growing cold. The color drained out of the world. Blood couldn’t reach her laryngeal sac, and it deflated. She had no way of attacking back.

Even seeing her helpless, the Dark Seiyuu didn’t stop the violence. If anything, she went after her even harder.

“Can you hear the voice? Can you? Can you hear it?” she yelled, stomping on Akane. How humiliating. She’d thought herself one step away from being the ultimate seiyuu, but now she literally couldn’t lift a finger. She just had to lie here and let her foe walk all over her.

She desperately tried to make her sac vibrate, forcing power she didn’t have

to try and counter the gravity.

Then she heard the voice. The voice that always sounded like it was distorted by several layers of glass, but suddenly it snapped into focus, sounding just a little clearer than normal.

It was anxious. A voice shaking with anxiety. Like a chill wind blowing through her mind. She still couldn't make out a word, but she felt like the sensation was there.

When she locked onto that, she found herself instinctively aware of a way to make aether vibrate more efficiently. When she put it into practice, she broke through the gravity field around her, and scrambled to her feet.

"...you heard it, didn't you?" the Dark Seiyuu said, with a look of glee.

"Yeah. Not clearly... And it didn't feel right."

Akane was able to stand, but she was in bad shape. A stream of crimson fluid was running down her chin. Blood. She realized there was even blood seeping out of her eyeballs. Too much blood was being sent to her laryngeal sac, and it was overflowing.

"You can't hear it completely, then."

"That doesn't matter... First, I'm gonna kill you!"

Akane threw herself at the Dark Seiyuu. She couldn't let it end like this. Not with her pride in tatters. For her to be the ultimate seiyuu, she had to kill the woman in front of her. With that in mind, she powered up her Seiyuu Karate.

But her desperate attack was easily dodged. Akane was kicked in the shin and sent flying to the ground.

"I'd love to keep fighting with you, but we're out of time. If you want to see me again, come after me." The Dark Seiyuu took a large device out of her pocket. "An aether beacon receiver. If you have this, you'll know where I am." She tossed the receiver to Akane, and turned to leave, her cape swirling. She said over her shoulder, "Follow me wherever that leads, no matter what you find there."

"Damn straight! I'll track you down! And this time, I'll kill you!"

Blood sprayed as she yelled. She tried to stand, but the muscles in her knees spasmed. The Dark Seiyuu took one look at her writhing and stalked away. She hopped on *The Black Swan* and flew off into the sky.

“Senpai! Are you OK? What happened?”

A few minutes later, Sachii had managed to escape from the gator pit intact and came running over to Akane. She was wiping the blood with her handkerchief.

“I nearly got myself killed. I’m gonna rest a bit and then go after her. I need to settle this.”

“That’s true. Can’t have anyone picking a fight with you!” Sachii nodded vigorously. She’d been thrown into a gator pit and escaped without a scratch. Lucky girl.

Either way, first she had to recover. She had the beacon receiver, so she could track the Dark Seiyuu down again.

But something happened that prevented that.

All gravity on Earth vanished.

The first thing they noticed was the floating gators.

Alligators are animals famed for slithering along the ground, but now they were in the air; all four of their legs were off the floor.

The water in the tanks and ponds came rising up, too, forming large spheres. A swimming alligator found itself trapped in one such sphere, thrashing its head as if begging for help. Each drop of water from the waterfall formed its own bead and went flying off around the dome.

Before they knew it, Akane and Sachii were floating, too. Spraying spheres of blood from her wounds, Akane spun through the air, leaving the ground behind.

“Eeek! I’m falling falling falling falling! Senpai, help help help!”

Sachii flailed desperately until she managed to grab Akane, then pulled her in tight, hugging her close. Akane knew the girl was scared but it hurt like hell.

Was the Dark Seiyuu attacking again? The moment she saw what was going on outside the dome, she realized that wasn't true. The situation was far worse than she'd imagined.

The Pacific Ocean was forming spheres and floating away.

About three hundred meters from the Tropical and Alligator Garden was Atagawa You Yu Beach. Normally covered in happy tourists, now it was in chaos. Balls of water larger than Tokyo Dome were floating off towards the heavens.

The sights around were so distracting it took a while to notice, but the change was affecting them internally, too. Her hands were itching. Her skin was swelling, like it was being pushed upwards from inside.

With gravity gone, the air pressure was dropping.

Air pressure was caused by the weight of the atmosphere. The sheer weight of all the air stacked up above the ground keeps it pressurized. But that seal had just been broken.

Gravity was the seal that kept the atmosphere in place, kept the pressure on, and at a macroscopic level, regulated average air speed. Each atmospheric particle naturally moves around really fast, at 500 meters a second, but with atmospheric pressure the particles collide with each other, resulting in an average speed — wind speed — that is at best a tenth of that. But with the pressurized lid popped off, the atmosphere's full potential was unleashed. The hidden runners let fly, and an incredible wind kicked up.

Near the surface atmospheric particles were still relatively congested, and the speed was cut down, but fifty kilometers up, in the stratosphere, it was another story. The troposphere and the stratosphere together contain 92% of the Earth's air, so above that things had thinned considerably. A huge quantity of air was starting to race off towards the void of space at full speed. And that speed was the particle's natural speed of 500 meters a second.

A 500 meter a second wind.

The destructive force of such a wind is beyond imagining.

Anything normally described as a 'wind' would never reach anything like that

speed. At a mere 25 meters a second, trees snap in two. At 30 meters, telephone poles bend. Strong typhoon winds blow wooden buildings away at 50 meters a second, and disastrous hurricanes that bend steel towers are still only 60 meters a second.

Even the shockwave of a nuclear bomb, which destroys everything in its path, is only 300 meters a second.

And this was 500 mps.

The fastest wind in the Earth's history started in the stratosphere and headed towards the Earth like it had spied some dominos.

This wind would reach the surface in approximately two minutes.

Akane detected the precursor to this wind. The entire conservatory was rattling, and the windows started to shatter. Wind was rising from the ground towards the sky, which almost never happened. And this wind was getting stronger.

Akane and Sachii were clinging to the metal frame of the conservatory. They could tell their lives were in serious danger. But dying here was not an option available to Akane. She had to kill the Dark Seiyuu. She had to prove she was stronger.

Akane wrapped herself and Sachii in an aether barrier. Her ability to sound the aether seemed to have improved since she'd listened to the voice. Covering her body in a layer of low-density aether, she cut the two of them off from outside influence. From inside everything turned black — the barrier even rejected light itself — so she had to make a small peephole. She used gravity control to stabilize herself, something she'd never been able to do without a transistor.

"Wow! You're amazing, senpai!" Sachii gushed.

This made Akane feel good. Like she'd taken yet another step towards becoming the ultimate seiyuu.

Then that 500mps wind reached the surface.

Everything was pulverized!

Every building mankind had ever built was blown away, leaving no trace behind. 10,000 years of history turned to nothing in a single instant.

The pyramids, the Great Buddha at Nara, Tokyo Skytree, the Sagrada Família, the Angkor Wat, the Louvre Museum, Machu Picchu, the Taj Mahal, the Colosseum, the Great Wall, the Statue of Liberty, the British Museum, Notre Dame, the Leaning Tower of Pisa, Stonehenge, Kiyomizu-dera, and the Empire State Building, all blown away!

And the Atagawa Tropical and Alligator Garden vanished, too. The steel frame of the dome and the foundation were ripped right out of the ground, the gators were sucked into the sky like confetti, collided with shards of glass, and were turned into mincemeat. The wind hit the spheres of ocean water, turning them into ellipses; rain began falling upwards into the sky.

Akane and Sachii were blown into the sky, as well. From the air, the scene below was utterly unreal. The blue-green light they'd grown so fond of was gone; the sky was red, and the surface dyed blue. Aether was moving with the wind; a redshift down wind and a blueshift up. All buildings on the surface were disintegrating, and swaths of soil were torn up with them. Great spheres of water were rising from the sea like a plague of *streptococcus pneumoniae*. The surface of the spheres was boiling. The atmospheric pressure had dropped so much that water was vaporizing at room temperature.

Akane sounded her voice desperately, maintaining the aether barrier. Aether friction on the barrier was causing a strong purple glow around them. Meanwhile, Sachii was just staring in stunned silence.

By this point, nearly all humans on Earth had perished. Any survivors were those lucky enough to be on spaceships, or in underground nuclear shelters or caves. The latter group's luck was not really worth writing home about. They would all die a moment later.

They were rocked by an earthquake of magnitude 16, stronger than anything ever recorded or that ever would be recorded, unprecedented and unparalleled, beyond the power of words to describe.

The epicenter was the entire Earth's surface.

Every plate on Earth began to fall apart as one. The cause lay deep below the surface, between 2900 and 5100 kilometers deep, in the outer core. The outer core was composed of liquid iron and nickel. Temperatures of 6000 degrees Celsius kept it all melted, flowing, and generating the Earth's magnetic field. Composed of iron and nickel though it may be, liquid was still liquid, and in gravity-free environments it formed spheres, minimizing surface area.

The changes to the outer core's shape was enough to destroy the mantle and crust above it. Fissures were spreading from the inside out. The Earth was exploding!

The roar of the magnitude 16 earthquake penetrated the aether barrier, reaching Akane's ears. It was literally the sound of the world ending.

But everything man-made had already been destroyed by the wind. What was lost now was all natural. Mountains, rivers, valleys, and oceans.

Mt. Fuji crumbled like a pile of sand. Lava came spitting out of the wounds. These grew and grew until a network of cracks covered the ground. The lava, too, formed floating spheres.

Spheres of ocean water several kilometers in diameter and spheres of lava several hundred meters across went drifting into space, glowing with a red light. Every so often the lava collided with the ocean water and an endless trail of steam erupted around them in phreatic explosions. When water become vapor, the volume becomes 1700 times larger. When a large volume of ocean water vaporizes, the explosion knows no bounds.

Debris scorched by the lava belched black smoke, mingling with the white steam clouds from the phreatic explosions and drifting upwards. Akane and Sachii flew between them, their aether barrier glittering purple.

Inside that barrier, the temperature was rising. Sea water heated by the lava and debris flung by the explosions were slamming into them, and each impact felt like they'd been punched. But even worse was the strain on Akane's laryngeal sac. A number of protrusions had torn from excessive blood flow. Too much blood was in her sac, and the rest of her body was turning cold.

She could feel her strength ebbing. She had only a few minutes left in her. When her strength failed, the aether barrier would vanish, and they'd plunge

into the ocean water and drown, into the lava and fry, have their heads caved in by flying debris, or if they were lucky enough to be flung into outer space, pass out peacefully from lack of oxygen. All of these options led to certain death. Death! Death! Death!

“Um, hey! Senpai! Look there! See that light?” Sachii shouted.

Shut up.

“Look, there! Purple light! It’s a ship, a ship! A ship in flight!”

What? Why didn’t you say so sooner?

She peered through the peephole and it actually was a ship. A streamlined body flying along, gleaming with purple light. It looked quite close, but this was an optical illusion, and it was actually several hundred meters away.

“Amamiya! Help! We need to manipulate gravity and move ourselves over to it!”

“Ehh... There’s no waaay...”

“You’re doing it anyway! Or I’m leaving you here!”

Sachii began singing, trying to twist some gravity control, but without a transistor it did seem beyond her. Oh well, she’d just have to do it herself. Singing, she put herself in a deep trance. The voice grew stronger, hitting Akane like a storm.

They passed through the black smoke and white steam, dodging a burning rock that popped out of the clouds and a two kilometer orb of sea water maintaining its shape while simultaneously exploding. Beyond that was the glittering purple light. The light of their salvation, the light of absolute affirmation!

When Akane came out of her trance an enormous ship lay before her. Massive letters read Space Security Board on the side, a logo depicted the solar system. The ship’s name was the *Samidare*.

The ship’s barrier and Akane’s made contact. Like a film of bacteria splitting played in reverse, the two barriers merged, and Akane and Sachii were absorbed into the ship’s safety zone.

“Hey! Open up! Open the hatch!”

She pounded on the side of the ship. Hands, legs, head, anything she could use. Her desperate plea must have been heard, because a hatch opened, someone grabbed her collar, and hauled her on board.

“You’ve got laryngeal sacs, so you’re seiyuu? Then hurry! Come help! Now!”

She was wearing a security board uniform, and clearly half-mad with panic. An official seiyuu. They were the top of the field, clearly superior to private sector seiyuu, but the situation had left her with no trace of that dignity remaining.

She shoved Akane and Sachii down the hall. As they ran, she handed them a syringe filled with fluid.

“Inject this! Quick!”

“Is this... Voir!? I’ve never even seen this before!”

Voir was a fabled top secret drug available only to official seiyuu. It increased blood flow to the laryngeal sac, allowing them to produce efficient aether vibrations, but was said to take a significant psychological toll.

What did that matter? If it made them stronger, that was all. Akane slammed the needle into her arm. Then she handed it to Sachii, who stabbed her arm, too.

Her mouth began moving on its own, laughter burbling out of her. Her sac responded, dancing like a mad thing.

For some reason, she felt convinced this would all work out.

“Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha! Right! To the studio!”

“Senpai, you’re amazing! I’m right behind you!”

The official seiyuu led them both to the studio.

Inside, all hell was breaking loose.

A seiyuu had several mics held to her throat and was screaming into them. Her sac was already swollen to the size of a melon. Another seiyuu was on all fours on the ground, convulsing and laughing hysterically. Other seiyuu were already beyond moving. All the blood in their bodies had drained out, and their

faces were pale.

The floor was sticky. Covered in seiyuu blood.

“Not enough control! More Voir!” the director ordered. A staff member tried to stab a syringe into the melon-sac seiyuu’s arm.

The official seiyuu escorting Akane tried to intervene. “Stop! If you give her any more, she’ll die!” she yelled.

“It’s an emergency! If we can just escape the Earth, a seiyuu’s life is a small price to pay! If you resist, you’ll be charged with treason and executed!” The director pulled out a pistol and shot the official seiyuu in the leg. She screamed in pain.

“What the... don’t fuck with seiyuu, asshole!” Akane snarled, stepping forward.

“Who the hell are you?”

“A seiyuu who just happened to be passing by.”

“Yeah? Normally that insult alone would count as treason but we’re dangerously short on staff. Get in there and fly this ship.”

She was damned if she was gonna take instructions from a piece of shit like this, but escape was her first priority. Akane grabbed a mic and placed it to her sac. She kicked the wounded seiyuu’s head out of her way, securing her spot. Sachii copied her, kicking the seiyuu’s head again.

The ship’s exterior was shown on screen. The color of the light was the opposite of how it had been — the space in front of them was blue, while the rear of the ship, nearer the surface, was red. With the loss of atmosphere, more aether was encroaching on the lower regions.

The ship was flying between two layers. Ahead of them were the towns blown away by the 500 kps winds, while behind them was a mass of mountains and tectonic plate fragments and lava kicked up by the magnitude 16 earthquake. In the current layer, lava and ocean spheres were colliding, and the steam left visibility extremely poor.

“Lava approaching at five o’clock!” Sachii yelled. Her head was still spinning,

but somehow she'd been put in charge of information relay.

The director yelled back, "Focus aether barrier deployment to the rear!"

The impact rocked the ship. Akane was thrown to the floor, but the wounded seiyuu cushioned the blow.

"Report damages!"

"Minor, but there's more lava coming! I don't think we can hold!"

"Hard to port! Get us outta here!"

The ship plunged into a steam cloud. They couldn't see a thing. Zero visibility at top speed. With the aether barrier deployed they couldn't use the high energy radar. Their only way of avoiding midair obstacles was by sight.

Shadows whipped across the blank wall of white. Pieces of buildings! Akane made the ship turn hard to starboard. This time she was slammed to the floor, but she was used to it now, and no longer needed the flesh cushion.

They managed to avoid a head-on collision, but the danger was hardly averted. A square-shaped building was spinning through the air, headed right for the tail. If it hit, they were doomed!

"Fire a beam! Cancel the barrier!"

Akane didn't wait for the director's order, she just made the aether resonate. Her approach was an extremely slapdash one. Just eliminate the obstacle, making it harmless. If the building wasn't solid, but liquid, or better yet, gas, they could pass through it harmlessly.

Purple beams were fired from the external aether amps. The barrier went down for an instant to let the beams through. There was an ear-splitting crack and the beams melted and vaporized the chunk of building. The ship slammed into the resulting gas.

"Hot!"

Akane leapt up. The floor had suddenly become extremely hot. She quickly jumped up onto the wounded seiyuu's body. She could smell flesh burning.

"Internal temperature rising! Main computer overheating!"

“Get us in some water!”

The ship veered, aiming for an oceanic sphere some ten kilometers wide. When it tried to enter, it bounced off like a skipping stone. It took several attempts before they managed to enter the boiling sphere.

“Computer damage below 20%. Basic navigation controls remain functional!”

Applying heat in a low pressure environment made water boil away furiously. The sea water vanished, leaving behind furiously churning steam and a pile of salt.

“Height is 800 kilometers. Entering thermosphere!”

Somehow the ship had made it through the rubble layer and had made it to the outer atmosphere, just outside the thermosphere. This was the height satellites roamed at and at which you could clearly tell the Earth was a sphere. Light from the aether friction should have shown the entire rainbow, but the light now was much softer. With much of the atmosphere gone, the aether winds were now scouring the surface, and the light produced was much less intense.

With less light from aether friction, it was actually possible to see the surface — usually it was too bright to make it out. And what they could see of it looked like a map of hell.

The seas were boiling, exposing the sea floors. The earthquakes were still going on, and mountain chains were crumbling, the aftershocks generating boiling tsunamis so powerful they changed the very shape of the coasts. Between the plates, the mantle itself was exposed, the crust peeling off and curling like skin. Lava on the surface made peaks higher than Everest. But these, in turn, were destroyed by further quakes.

The noise of it was so loud it could be heard in space. Sound traveled easily in space. With the atmosphere leaking and the discrepancy in aether concentration removed, sounds on the surface went directly into outer space.

The Earth was dying, and every part of it was screaming.

“Halting seiyou flight. Switching to aether rotor.”

The *Samidare* was about 5000 kilometers from the Earth. Debris has scattered enough to no longer be a major concern, and the seiyuu were exhausted enough that continuing seiyuu-generated anti-gravity flight was no longer an option.

Sighs of relief could be heard all over the ship. They'd escaped the Earth's destruction.

"So what happened, anyway?" Akane asked, wiping the sweat from her brow.

The director shook her head, switching the screen to the aethernet broadcast. The aethernet used aether as a medium for transmissions, so as long as you had a receiver, you could access it anywhere in the solar system. The images and sounds were heavily distorted by the turbulence the Earth's collapse had caused in the aether flow, but the confusion in the announcer's voice was clear enough. Earth had lost its gravity, and the entire planet had ceased to exist — that was all the information they had. Ships that had managed to escape were being directed not to the Moon but to Mars. It sounded like the Moon was no longer safe. There was a severe danger of it being struck by pieces flung off the collapsing Earth.

Earth was finished. Eight billion people, a quarter of humanity's total population, had perished.

Strangely enough, Akane felt great. To her, Earth was little more than a symbol of the Surveillance Society's oppression.

She was far more concerned with whether the Dark Seiyuu had survived. But if she'd managed to survive, there was no way the Dark Seiyuu would have let herself die. Akane swore to track her down and kill her with her own hands.

"Surviving seiyuu, well done! I'm sure you're all exhausted. Please, get some rest."

The director's voice interrupted Akane's thoughts. She was tempted to confront her again, but she was utterly wiped. She needed to get some sleep.

The hall outside the studio was very cold. She could see her breath. Space was a chilly place. Aether conducted heat, so heat was always draining away. It

seemed like the heaters were set quite low to minimize energy loss.

“Senpai, wanna sleep together?”

Akane collapsed on a bed, and Sachii hopped in next to her without waiting for an answer. She considered kicking her out, but Sachii’s warmth made her reconsider. It was so terribly cold. The blankets provided were too thin to be of any use. If she tried to sleep under them anyway, she’d probably catch a cold. Health was everything to a seiyuu, so a cold could be fatal.

“Senpai, you smell amazing.”

Sachii’s warmth spread to her. She was so short her head rested naturally against Akane’s chest. Akane remembered seeing an old movie where a couple had lain like this. She was pretty sure head rubbing was involved. That was probably what manners dictated. Akane dutifully rubbed Sachii’s head, and Sachii let out a happy chuckle, forgetting all the tragedy. As ditzy as this girl could be, she was also pretty resilient.

The two of them embraced, like the seiyuu of old. In the Great Seiyuu Age, seiyuu sent on adventures through the Milky Way moved in pairs — coupling, they called it. Back when aether manipulation was still mostly trial and error, ship interiors had all been freezing, and these pairs had used their body heat to keep each other warm.

Pondering how she would kill the Dark Seiyuu, Akane fell asleep.

As she did, though she wasn’t vibrating the aether, she thought she heard the voice again.

IV

The *Samidare* had a lovely streamlined body marred by several thick, cylindrical aether rotors. How unfortunate. It was a painful sight, like a fish impaled on a spear.

Whirr whirr whirr whirr. The columns rotated. Aether flow was pulled in, generating light. Where the aether flow matched the direction of rotation less friction was generated and it glowed red; where the aether flow countered the direction of rotation more friction was generated and the light was blue.

Aether rotor flight was a method of generating propulsion by dipping these rotating columns into the aether flow. Why did simply rotating columns generate propulsion? The number one law of fluids, Bernoulli's principle. This principle was a law of preservation of energy with regards to fluids. When considering a ball thrown through the air, the only types of energy worth considering are the kinetic energy and the potential energy, but in fluids the energy generated by pressure also applies. Bernoulli's principle states that the sum of kinetic, potential, and pressure energy is a constant.

The rotating pillars pull aether in the direction of the rotation. When the aether flow and directional rotation match, the aether flow accelerates; on the opposite side, it decelerates. As the accelerating side increases kinetic energy, the pressure lessens; on the decelerating side the kinetic energy decreases and the pressure increases. A pressure gradient forms, causing the entire body to move in the accelerated direction. Propulsion is generated perpendicular to the direction of flow.

Within the solar system there was a spiral-shaped aether flow headed towards the sun. By tacking into that flow, it was possible to generate propulsion away from the sun, towards the outer planets. Aether rotor propulsion was originally a major flight mechanic, the principle by which most ships flew at the dawn of the Great Seiyuu Age. These days, seiyuu-powered flight was cheaper, so it was not often used, but it was still available on all ships

as a backup propulsion mechanism.

As the sound of the aether rotors hummed around them, Akane fiddled with the beacon receiver the Dark Seiyuu had given her. The tiny screen showed what looked like a simplified chart of the solar system. A red circle indicated the Dark Seiyuu's location, quite a long way from Akane.

"Mm? What's up, Senpai?" Sachii yawned, sliding over to her.

Akane stared at the screen, saying nothing.

"What is that thing?"

"A receiver. The one who attacked you at the gator garden tossed it to me. Looks like she's headed for Jupiter."

"Oh yeah? But this ship's headed for Mars."

"Yeah. We're gonna have to hijack it. First, I'm gonna kill the shit out of that asshole director and the rest of her staff. Just desserts for the way they treat seiyuu here."

"That sounds great! I don't think we've got enough lives to survive this place otherwise. Get them before they get us!"

Killing the director and staff was simple. Nobody knew that Akane had laryngeal sacs implanted all over her body. Surprise attacks left them all dead within a few hours. She shoved all the corpses in the freezer.

The seiyuu were a bigger problem. A ship like this was normally staffed with over a dozen seiyuu. Akane was pretty sure she could fly it on her own, but she preferred to leave as many seiyuu alive as possible. But it seemed unlikely any of them would be willing to cooperate with her personal vengeance quest.

The solution came in the form of Voir. All the seiyuu seemed to be addicted to the stuff, so as long as she controlled the supply, they were as good as hers.

Akane slaughtered the director and staff, stole the Voir supply, and assumed control of all the seiyuu on board. When the director died, someone had sent a mayday over a wireless comm, but with the Earth destroyed, it was unlikely anyone was listening.

On board, a new order was established. It functioned like a pyramid with Akane at the top. The aether rotors had stopped, and seiyuu flight had them speeding towards Jupiter. Seiyuu lives were the fuel for this fire. Seiyuu were pumped full of Voir, turned into mere batteries to keep the ship moving. Late stage Voir addiction led to death, as all the blood in the body become concentrated in the laryngeal sac. Before she figured out the right dosage, six of the 11 seiyuu on board died in a couple of weeks.

The gap between the *Samidare* and the Dark Seiyuu was slowly shrinking. *The Black Swan* was small and nimble, but it couldn't match the *Samidare* for sheer power.

Twenty days after leaving Earth, the ship reached Jupiter.

Clang!

The ship rocked. *Clunk!* Again.

"Amamiyaaa! Anything we can do about this shaking?"

"Don't think there is. It's always like this around Jupiter."

The screen was filled with an image of Jupiter. It was a sinister sight, like the world seen when badly drunk. Orange, yellow, brown, white, and blue clouds all swirling together, writhing, swallowing each other up. The eyes were the most unnatural spectacle. Jupiter was covered in eyes, all staring back at them. Blue eyes, red eyes, white eyes, orange eyes... Naturally, these were not actually eyes. They were whirlpools, cloud flows that looked like eyes. Even armed with that knowledge, staring at this view for an extended period of time was enough to make you feel insane. How could our solar system contain anything like this?

She couldn't let herself go crazy now. To prevent it, Akane injected herself with Voir. This made everything exciting. The ship's rocking felt like the beat of a rock concert.

The rocking was caused by Jupiter's aether friction. Jupiter's diameter was eleven times that of Earth, yet it only took ten hours to rotate. This intense rotation sent shockwaves through the aether, shaking the entire region. The light effects were as intense as the sounds. The lights didn't appear that bright

at a glance, but that's because the light was of a higher energy than the visible spectrum. If you stepped off the ship you'd be dead in seconds.

The *Samidare* had followed the Dark Seiyuu's beacon to Jupiter. Jupiter was a very large planet, but there was a limit to where people could go. If you got too close to the equator the radiation became so strong no seiyuu could ever defend against it, which meant Jupiter could only be approached from the two poles. The beacon indicated that the Dark Seiyuu was at the south pole, but the signal had suddenly cut out a while earlier. This had forced them to approach Jupiter to search for her.

Jupiter's surface was a deluge of colors. Just as Akane got so sick of staring at them she started nodding off, an alarm rang. The ship's computer had detected an approaching vessel. Part of the screen enlarged. A little black speck far below them became an isosceles triangle.

The Black Swan!

The ship rose towards them, and the beacon activated again. It was definitely her. The Dark Seiyuu was on board that ship. Hiding in Jupiter's thick clouds.

The Dark Seiyuu's face appeared on screen. She was sending an aether transmission from *The Black Swan* to the *Samidare*.

"You escaped the gravity failure. I thought you'd pull it off."

"Wait, you knew? Are you the one who caused it to fail?"

Instead of answering, *The Black Swan* fired a laser beam at the *Samidare*. In aether-rich regions of space, beams were incredibly powerful.

The ship rocked violently. It filled with the scent of something burning.

"Fire at the stern! Closing barrier walls and extinguishing!"

"Shit! Fire a beam back at her!"

They tried to counterattack but their target had vanished from both screen and beacon. She'd fled into Jupiter's thick cloud cover. Differences in the aether density meant light shining from Jupiter's interior was all reflected by the outer space border. Meanwhile, light could travel from space down to Jupiter without any problems. Within the clouds you could see out, but from above them they

couldn't see inside. Akane's ship was at a huge disadvantage here.

"Beams! Fire! Fire at will!"

"But Senpai! We'll never hit!"

Sachii was right. *The Black Swan* surfaced nowhere near the clouds their beams were aimed at, attacked again, and vanished once more.

"Ship temperature rising! We're gonna melt!"

"Right, then descend! Down to Jupiter!"

But when they approached Jupiter, *The Black Swan* appeared and fired another beam. They were forced to turn to avoid it. This repeated, preventing them from ever entering the clouds. The smaller ship was far more agile.

The *Samidare* thrashed left, right, up and down, dodging the beams. Sudden G Forces almost knocked Akane out. Each time, she thought she heard the voice.

It was like a wave of sadness beating her about the head. The voice was in her very bones, and each time it echoed through her, it felt like a knife twisting. But the strange thing was, the more pain it caused, the more ideas for improved aether sounding came to her.

She could do this! Akane accelerated the *Samidare's* gravity control. She narrowly dodged a beam while falling towards Jupiter. Aether was compressed rapidly beneath the ship, giving off a violet light. As Jupiter drew near, the radiation got stronger, but still remained within the levels the aether barrier could ward off. As the atmosphere grew thicker, the radiation decayed, and only visible light remained. The light grew diffuse, and the sky gradually turned blue.

Clouds. Clouds. Clouds. Clouds in all directions. The *Samidare* flew across the top of them. Unlike Earth, the horizon was a flat line. The planet was too big to give any indication that it was a sphere.

Inside the clouds, an unbelievable amount of lighting flashed. Energy a thousand times what Earth lightning had was spitting out here and there. The *Samidare* showed no signs of fear, plunging right into the maelstrom.

Just inside the clouds, the light levels quickly grew dim, but the purple light from the aether barrier provided illumination enough. The top layer of clouds was orange, composed largely of lightweight ammonia. As the ammonia gave way to heavier water vapor, the color changed from orange to yellow, from yellow to white, and from white to blue. Warm colors grew darker, until the world around them was shrouded in gloom.

“Shadow at three o’clock!”

That jagged triangle grew close, then shot away, like a boomerang. The *Samidare* rocked. The beam had hit home. But the impact was much softer than they’d been in space. Aether was thinner in the atmosphere, so the laser beam had less energy; interference from the aether flow in the storm weakened it still further. The storms of Jupiter were probably the least effective place in the entire solar system to use a laser beam.

The *Samidare* fired beams back, but the other ship was already hidden in the clouds again. She was sticking to her hit and away strategy. The weakened beams meant they weren’t going to be downed in a single hit, but the accumulated damage was still bad news.

To avoid the clouds, the *Samidare* continued its rapid descent. Rain and hail fell alongside it. Rain of water, ammonia, and sulfuric acid. In the gloomy blue clouds, the rain found friends, merging with them, but eventually the size of the drops stopped expanding. Instead, they vaporized. Boiling into gas, they flowed back upwards, becoming clouds again, a never-ending cycle.

The *Samidare* escaped the cycle, falling down, down, down... Until...

“The clouds have cleared!”

They found themselves in a calm as removed from the storm as possible. So open...! A clearing as far as the eye could see, lit by the lightning above. Bolts of lightning with all the force of atomic bombs struck around them by the thousands, by the tens of thousands, flickering like a broken fluorescent light.

This was hell. The *Samidare* was hovering above the surface of hell. A clear layer of hydrogen. Below them was a sea of liquid metallic hydrogen, far enough below that they could have stacked several Earths in the gap. If anyone on board was acrophobic, they’d have gone mad, but Akane’s mind was not so

easily bested. A height several times the Earth was no more impressive than a height several times an ant.

Akane thought she heard that voice from this mind-bending landscape. The further into Jupiter they went, the clearer that voice from the edge of the world carried into her brain. The voice seemed filled with sorrow, a feeling as if her flesh was slowly melting away...

“There! Right above us!”

Sachii’s cry dragged Akane out of her reverie. *The Black Swan* had emerged from the clouds in the distance, wheeling like a bird of prey. The purple light of its aether barrier illuminated the rain around it like fireworks. Akane’s laryngeal sac shook, and a laser beam shot out of the ship’s aether amp. A column of light every bit as strong as the lightning impaled *The Black Swan*. Where the beam hit the barrier an explosion of light occurred. The shockwave of light rocked the *Samidare*. When the orchestra of light faded, *The Black Swan* was unharmed.

The Dark Seiyuu was good. Laser beams were weaker in the heavy atmosphere but surviving a bullseye from a Security Board ship amp was something else. She must have manipulated the flow of aether in an instant, dispersing the energy. They’d never shoot her down with beams like this. They’d need to use a weapon with some actual mass.

“Amamiya, does this ship have any missiles?”

“No missiles. It does have some escape pods!”

Escape pods? Those could be used in place of missiles, but with no explosives aboard...

Explosives... Explosives... Oh! She’d had a good idea.

“All seiyuu, assemble!” Akane yelled into the P.A. system.

Three minutes later all six surviving seiyuu were here. Their names were Kisara, Neshihiki, Teise, Inori, Midokawa, and Sanou. They were all in such frightful condition it was astounding they were still alive. Voir addiction had left them gaunt, as if all the liquid in them had been drained away, leaving nothing but skin and bones behind, their eyes bugged out like a deep sea fish caught on a line. As lifeless as their bodies looked, their laryngeal sacs were in perfect

health. They were alive and kicking, sounding the aether around them and generating light. Voir was awful for your health but definitely great at extracting a seiyuu's subliminal potential.

Akane injected all the remaining stock of Voir into the seiyuu, gave them their instructions, and loaded them onto the escape pods. Their directive was simple. Get as close to *The Black Swan* as they could, manipulate the aether, and fire laser beams as one, instantly and dramatically raising the heat and pressure. They were surrounded by hydrogen, highly pressurized by the immense weight of Jupiter's atmosphere. If they concentrated even more heat and pressure, Akane was hoping they could cause a nuclear fusion reaction.

A seiyuu nuke.

Akane knew fusion was a high bar to meet. They needed at least 80 times the pressure at Jupiter's core. But the strictly managed security board official seiyuu were far more powerful than civilian seiyuu. And they were all junkies injected with so much Voir it was about to kill them. Akane's experience and gut instincts suggested they just might manage to output enough pressure to cause fusion.

Enough thoughts, action! The missiles with Kisara, Neshihiki, and Teise on board shot away from the *Samidare*, rocketing towards *The Black Swan*.

Neshihiki's missile failed at ignition. It raised pressure and destroyed itself, nothing of any interest occurring. She must have lost her nerve. But Kisara and Teise pulled off their missions admirably. Hydrogen collided with hydrogen, reacting to each other, and pressure beyond the Coulomb force caused fusion, changing them to the more kinetically stable helium, expelling the excess energy outwards. Immediately, two miniature suns appeared in the sky above Jupiter. There was a wave of sound and light that reached even the *Samidare* some distance away.

"Did we get her?" Akane said, stabilizing the *Samidare* and searching the screen. *The Black Swan* was still intact. But it had clearly sustained damage. One wing was missing pieces.

"Nicely done. Keep it up." The Dark Seiyuu's voice came over a transmission. She seemed positively delighted to be attacked like this.

“Be ready. I’m about to board your ass and kill you with my own two hands.”

“Looking forward to it! But it seems like we have company. I’ll leave you two alone. We’ll meet again.”

The transmission cut out, and *The Black Swan* darted off to the sky.

“Wait!”

Akane moved to give chase, but a missile popped out of the clouds, exploding right next to the *Samidare*.

“Sachii, what’s going on?”

“I have no idea!”

As they reeled, a massive ship descended right in front of them. One three times the size of the *Samidare*. A long, thin airship-type ship, bristling with aether amps and railguns and missiles. A flashy logo and the ship’s name were drawn on the side.

Rise Detective Agency, Inc.

The *Cruadín*.

Akane knew the agency name. They called themselves detectives, but they were just bounty hunters. They generally operated in pairs, a lead detective and an assistant. Even now, no official police force operated in the outer planets, so the bounty system was used to entrust matters to civilian hands. Any number of companies had sprung up to collect these bounties. The Rise Detective Agency was one of the bigger ones.

“Hey there! I’m a 1st rank detective, Minerva Ibrahim!” an enthusiastic voice came from the screen. It was a transmission from the *Cruadín*. A lady with dark skin and long blonde hair appeared on screen.

“And I’m a 1st rank assistant, Nanase Steinbach.” This assistant appeared to be quite a downer. A girl with unhealthy skin, and short white hair. Her eyes were fixed on a point about 30 degrees too high, like she was seeing a ghost.

“Wanted criminal, Akane Yomokura!” Minerva cried, gesticulating dramatically. “You’re under arrest on suspicion of hijacking the *Samidare*! Surrender at once!”

“Hardly the time for that! Earth already collapsed,” Akane pointed out, ignoring the charge.

“Whether the Earth burns or the Sun explodes, I see my jobs through!”

“Well, ain’t you a loyal dog. Sachii, stick a seiyuu nuke in this bitch.”

“Roger that!”

The missiles with Inori and Sanou were fired at the *Cruadín*. But the *Cruadín* fired more missiles, and before they could cause a fusion reaction they were vaporized into Jupiter’s atmosphere.

“Ha ha ha! Struggle all you like, plebeians! You can never compete with a true elite!”

“We’ve tested into the 99th percentile.”

“Damn it! Retreat!”

Their opponent was skilled and well-prepared. They were at a huge disadvantage. The only path forward was to retreat and regroup.

“Retreat where?”

“Computer, map of Jupiter!” Akane quickly scanned the screen, thinking. “Got it, to the red spot!”

The red spot. The largest storm on Jupiter. Three times the size of Earth. It had maintained its current shape for hundreds of years, spinning without end, untold energy stored within.

Sending a ship into the red spot was tantamount to suicide. But Akane wasn’t acting without a plan. In the storm, the winds would render the opponent’s missiles useless. And her ship would put up less wind resistance than the larger one, giving them a small advantage. Inside the red spot, they might be able to lessen their current disadvantage.

Trying to shake the *Cruadín*, the *Samidare* hid in the clouds, racing towards the red spot. The closer they got, the harder the crosswind buffeted them. Hail the size of cannon shells slammed against the ship, the pounding of it echoing through the interior. It was all they could do to keep the ship stable.

Orange and white clouds became scarce while red tints increased. According to the computer, this was caused by phosphorus and organic matter rising from the depths. They could no longer see the *Cruadín* at all. If their opponent had lost sight of them as well, that was ideal, but they couldn't count on being that lucky. They were pros. They undoubtedly had top class detection tech.

There was a flash of light to the *Samidare's* seven. It was the *Cruadín's* nuclear missile. But the impact was weak, negated by the storm. Akane's plan was paying off. But this also proved the *Cruadín* had definitely not lost track of them. At this rate, they were likely to catch up.

"Power up the aether rotors!"

The aether rotors extended into the extremely thick atmosphere of Jupiter. This caused an immediate increase in resistance — they were in danger of losing control of the ship's stability. Akane was rolling the dice big time. Inside the red spot, the winds hit the sides of the ship. The rotors could turn that sidelong force into forward propulsion. She was trying to turn the red spot's storm force from an impediment into acceleration.

With zero visibility, they began moving faster and faster. Akane and Sachii were slammed against the wall. The faster they went the worse the damage taken from any obstructions. All action creates an equal reaction.

A giant hailstone struck one of the rotors head on. The *Samidare* began to spin. Still Akane held fast to her mic, sounding the aether. The ship spun like a washing machine, but she gradually started recovering control over the gravity.

"Senpai! Light ahead!"

Another missile exploding? No, that wasn't it. Everything ahead of them was brighter.

They were getting close to the eye of the red spot. The red spot was a giant whirlpool, and like any typhoon, there was a calm at the center.

The *Samidare* burst out into the eye of the red spot. The storm died away, like it had never been there at all. Far above them they could see blue skies. A column of light poured down from the sky above.

Behind them was a wall of clouds the size of a planet. Like paint flowing in a

stream, red-tinted brown and orange clouds were flowing to the left, interrupted every now and then by smaller eddies.

Far ahead of them was the other wall. It was so massive it appeared to be rather close but was actually as far away as the Indian Ocean was wide. A number of different red flows all blurred together at this distance, the borders between them lost. The opposing clouds were flickering with light like a Christmas tree with a glitched battery. Each one of those light bulbs was a thousand times the strength of lightning. If that gives any sense of the scale here.

“Senpai, what next?”

“Wait for the *Cruadín*. The moment they pop out, hit them with a seiyuu nuke.”

“Aye-aye!”

Akane’s entire strategy revolved around locating her opponent first. Laying in ambush in the stable eye and hitting the *Cruadín* hard the moment it emerged.

Fifteen minutes later, there was movement in the clouds. The clouds swelled up from within, and a cigar-shaped object emerged.

“There! Fire that missile!”

It was their last seiyuu nuke, the pod with Midokawa aboard. The fusion activated before the opponent could respond. A direct hit! When the explosion cleared, there was nothing there. Had they been completely vaporized?

But then the *Samidare*’s side was gouged out by a physical shell fired from somewhere.

“Too bad! My compliments on an excellent plan!”

“I suppose that’s the best we can expect from someone so average.”

Crap! It was the *Cruadín*, not vaporized after all! Both the detective and her assistant were totally fine.

“Ha ha ha ha! Are you surprised? That was just a decoy!”

“A common technique for anyone as advanced as we are.”

The *Cruadín* had made a duplicate of itself out of carbon nanofiber, flying this decoy via a rocket engine. The pros had seen right through Akane's plan.

"Which will it be? Surrender, or death? Time to choose."

The *Cruadín* hit the *Samidare* with another volley.

"Yikes! Senpai, what'll we do?"

"This! Sachii, hold onto something."

The *Samidare's* interior lost all gravity. The ship went into free fall.

The *Cruadín* remained parked above them, so the gap between the two ships widened. Akane had killed the *Samidare's* gravity control. The massive gravitational force of Jupiter was stronger than any engine.

The *Samidare's* death defying bungee jump seemed to freak the detectives out. Unable to treat their own lives as cavalierly as Akane did, they descended slowly, maintaining gravity control.

Meanwhile, the *Samidare* was going so fast adiabatic compression sheathed them in fire.

"Eek... Senpai! We're gonna melt!" Sachii's hands were flapping all over, in a panic.

"Don't worry!" Akane said, giving her a hug.

The *Samidare* continued to drop inside a ball of fire. Several hours of falling, and the red spot's swirl was still there, the red clouds still moving in the same direction. However, the light had changed. It was gradually growing darker. As the air pressure grew, the aether volume lessened, and the light energy grew correspondingly weak. Eventually...

"The ship's temperature is starting to drop, Senpai!"

This contradicted the combined gas law, which stated that temperatures rose with increased pressure. According to that law, as pressure grows, the frequency of aether friction would grow larger, and as a result, temperatures would rise; but it was now known that at pressures over a certain limit this no longer applied. At approximately three million atmospheres, matter forced all aether out of the air, and the higher the pressure grew, the lower the

temperature became. As the *Samidare* headed to the depths of Jupiter, it passed the breaking point for the combined gas law, and the temperature lowered enough to avoid melting. That had been Akane's goal.

"Right, we can start slowing down now..."

Gravity control restored, the *Samidare* continued falling slowly through the eye of the red spot. Akane wiped a cold sweat from her brow. She'd bet her life and beat the odds.

"Eek! Senpai, there's some sort of tower!"

About half an hour after restoring gravity control, a long, thin, bizarre object appeared before the falling ship. It was made of something transparent, like a diamond; even in this darkness it reflected the light, sparkling. It was an extremely sharp cone; while quite thin at the top it gradually widened out until it became a giant wall.

After a while, the tower branched. Like a snow crystal, with countless smaller branches off the thick center, each of which split into even smaller branches. Liquid was gushing out from the tips of the branches. Some branches ejected this liquid with great force, like a fountain, while others were oozing stickier-looking fluid.

There were narrow grooves from the central tower to the branches, carrying the fluid. Like blood vessels.

To think something like this lay beneath the red spot. No, perhaps this being here was why the red spot existed. The red spot was a Taylor Column created around the obstacle this tower formed.

A Taylor Column. A stagnant cylindrical current that forms above an obstruction beneath. When there is no other influence affecting it, this theorem suggests the current will form directly perpendicular to the obstruction. As the current below is deflected by the obstruction, it flows upwards, making it appear like a speck on the surface. For instance, it's well-known that the Kuroshio current is influenced by a Taylor Column created by the landform on the sea bed.

However, why would there be a giant, unstable-looking construct deep inside Jupiter? It looked like something that should have long since collapsed under the massive gravitational pull.

“Senpai! I can see the bottom!”

The *Samidare* began hovering in midair. The ‘bottom’ was the ocean of liquid metallic hydrogen. The point at which pressure grew so great even hydrogen became metallic.

The tower rose out of the peaceful, stormless sea. It looked like the tower continued beneath the surface.

Forgetting that the detectives were still after them, Akane paused to gaze at the scene before her. The sea rocked softly, so transparent it looked like liquid glass. Near the sea’s surface, like oil floating on the water, there were irregularly shaped membranes, like amoeba, and from time to time these would cling to the tower and began sliding up it, seemingly without resistance. The branches continued down into the sea, and the amoeba clustered around these branches, entering the tower interior. It was a magnificent work of art. Staring at it gave her a strange, pleasurable-yet-ticklish feeling, like down being stroked against her brain. Such a strange shape; she couldn’t tell if it was natural or man-made.

“Senpai, something’s flying at us!”

Sachii’s voice snapped Akane out of it. One of the branches had shot a transparent fluid at the *Samidare*, like a fountain.

“Don’t worry, we have the aether barrier.”

But Akane’s optimism soon proved unfounded. When the liquid touched the aether barrier, there was a brilliant burst of light, and it seeped right through.

“You’re kidding! It’s sounding aether?”

That was the only explanation. This mysterious clear fluid was controlling aether, neutralizing the barrier. If a being that could control aether at will was defined as a seiyuu, then this fluid was a seiyuu, too.

The mysterious fluid passed through the aether barrier and reached the ship

itself. It pooled on the side, gradually broadening until it covered the entire exterior.

“Superfluid helium infecting 70% of the ship,” came the computer’s calm analysis.

Superfluid. A condition in which quantum properties are expanded to macrosizes exclusively in extremely low temperature environments. Viscosity becomes zero, and it becomes capable of slipping through the gaps between atoms.

Indeed, while Akane was looking at information on the properties of superfluids, the superfluid helium seiyuu permeated the *Samidare*’s interior.

“Senpai! It’s already here!”

The superfluid helium seiyuu passed through several walls, reaching the studio and crawling along the walls as if searching for something. Little multicolored lights showed on the clear surface. It was vibrating the aether.

Akane felt an odd movement at her throat. Her laryngeal sac was vibrating on its own, against her will. All the sacs she’d transplanted onto herself vibrated with it. A terrible pain ran through her, like she was being twisted from the inside, like nothing she’d ever experienced before. Like part of her own body was literally betraying her, the laryngeal sacs moved as they pleased. Up, down, right, left, forward, back, diagonally. Twisting all about, sounding the aether, blue, red, green, orange, yellow, purple... One color after another surrounding her body.

The helium seiyuu was sounding all sorts of colors, too. These seemed to be responding to the colors her laryngeal sacs were producing. Like a colorful game of hacky sack, they generated colors, interacting with each other.

“Are they... Having a conversation?”

Akane couldn’t believe this. Part of her own flesh was chatting up some superfluid helium? But that was the best description she had for the phenomenon before her eyes. They were using aether to communicate.

A moment later, an extremely childish flash of rage swept over Akane. This was like she was being left out! Like friends she’d shared everything with had

suddenly rejected her!

“Don’t let that helium tempt you! I’m much stronger than any helium seiyuu!” Akane yelled. To prove this, she attempted to steal the seiyuu power from the helium seiyuu. “Radarederodo, daraderedoro, zodezadoze, zedozadozoda, dazozado, dozazoda!”

Chanting a mantra she’d learned in training school, she focused her mind, trying to regain control of her laryngeal sacs. And using the conversation channel they’d opened with the helium seiyuu, she absorbed its power. Like a hungry ghost, without a thought for anything else, she stole the helium seiyuu’s power.

Like she was snapping threads around them, she regained control over her sacs. A moment later, the aether sounded, and heat rays fired. Powerful beams! The helium seiyuu tried to cancel it, but her power overwhelmed it. She fired heat ray after heat ray after heat ray, saturating her foe’s aether vibrations.

The helium seiyuu began to vaporize. Superfluids don’t boil. Their thermal conductivity is extremely high, so heat is carried to the surface and only the outer layer turns to gas. The volume shrank without a sound, eventually vanishing entirely.

“Got ya!” Akane roared, and roughly kicked the *Samidare* into motion. She circled round the tower at high speeds. She was feeling omnipotent, like she could even move mountains.

“Nice work, Senpai! You’re a bad ass!”

“Right? I kicked its ass!”

She was so busy celebrating she failed to notice the ship approaching from above.

“Akane Yomokura! Sachii Amamiya! I knew you survived!”

“You’re as durable as cockroaches.”

The detective and her assistant appeared on the screen. The *Cruadín* had caught up with them. But Akane was not in the mood to turn tail and flee again. She had more than enough power now. She’d show them what a seiyuu could

do!

A wave of aether left the *Samidare*'s amps, headed for the tower. The tower began to lean. A tower at least as tall as the Earth itself. The tower was held upright by gravity control generated by the helium seiyuu. Akane temporarily canceled that control. And Jupiter's immense gravitational pull was enough that even a momentary fluctuation in that power was enough to destroy the tower.

The tower collapsed, slowly, very slowly. Or at least, it appeared slow, but was actually incredible fast. As proof of that, the tower's collapse was generating shockwave after shockwave.

The powerful shockwaves were snapping off the tower's delicate branches. Thousands and thousands of branches rode the shockwaves like jagged missiles. Directly towards the *Cruadín*. They pierced the aether barrier, countless branches impaling the ship. Even a sturdy detective agency ship couldn't stand up to this.

An escape pod shot out of the *Cruadín*'s side. Looks like Akane wasn't the only durable one. The detectives might be even more roach-like.

"Yikes, Senpai! We're in trouble!"

The falling tower reached the sea, generating a tsunami. A tsunami of liquid metallic hydrogen. As tall as the Earth's radius.

"Let's get outta here!"

The *Samidare* shot towards the sky. Sounding the aether with all the power she had left, the ship went up and up and up.

In the ship's wake, the red spot spun wildly. But that spin was destined to subside.

V

“Um, Senpai, we only have another week of food,” said Sachii, chewing some cartilage. Once stripped of all flesh, the bone was flung against the wall.

“Well, yeah. It ain’t an infinite supply.”

Akane threw her bone as well. The pile of bones was beginning to smell. Over the last week, the mold had take over, oozing a black fluid. Maggots had shown up from god knows where. The *Samidare* interior was decaying. Only Akane and Sachii were on board, and neither knew how to clean. The rise of entropy showed no bounds. The floor was invisible beneath piles of discarded clothing and ration bags that didn’t make it to the garbage can. Only the studio had gravity control, which maintained some semblance of order. The gravity-free sections of the ship were so filled with dust just stepping into them was enough to cause bronchitis.

Akane tore into her meat. It was not particularly flavorful, but the texture was somewhere between beef and chicken. The lump of meat she was working on had two eyes and a mouth.

After a month of drifting in the *Samidare*, they’d started sustaining themselves by eating the bodies of the director, staff, and seiyuu preserved in the freezer. Not wanting to deal with any refusals, Akane had told Sachii it was pork, and chopped it up into smaller pieces. You’d think the shape of the bones would be a dead giveaway, but Sachii never complained. Either she was a real idiot or had figured it out and elected not to say anything. It didn’t matter which.

“What’ll we do once we run out of food?” Sachii was using the bones to make a sort of caveman house. It was her way of killing time.

“I’ll just have to eat you.”

“So I’m just so cute you want to eat me up?”

Akane sprawled out on the floor, looking at the screen. Outside the *Samidare*

was some space vegetation three times the size of the ship. It seemed to draw energy from the rotation gained from the aether flow; it had wings arranged like the propellers on a wind turbine, and the tips of each wing had more turbines growing from them. From the center rose a flagellum in a bacteria-like spiral, leaning the body in a direction it could rotate effectively. It seemed to be aiming for the whirls the *Samidare* generated. It had been following them the last few weeks but seemed harmless, so they'd let it be.

"Or we could eat that," Akane said, pointing at the space plant. She thought it was a genius idea, but Sachii seemed unenthused.

"Ew, it looks so gross. Is it even edible? And going outside to harvest it would be so haaaard. And dangerous."

"Yeah, maybe... dunno if I can be bothered."

Akane flopped back down on the floor. They'd been holed up in this ship so long she'd grown super lazy.

There was nothing to do. Nothing but sleep. Sleeping was easy. Just close your eyes and stop thinking. But since she couldn't sleep all the time, Akane thought about the past. About what had happened a month ago, after they'd escaped Jupiter.

"We're out of the atmosphere! In a stable orbit!"

Using the overwhelming power the helium seiyuu had given her, the *Samidare* escaped the great red spot and made it to orbit around Jupiter.

But the price she paid was high — exhaustion beyond comprehension. It was like all her transplanted laryngeal sacs had turned into bowling balls, leaving all her muscles throbbing.

"I'm bushed. Gonna sleep. You take over gravity control."

It was all she could do to drop these instructions on Sachii. Akane collapsed on the floor of the studio and slept like she was dead. When she awoke from this dreamless slumber, she found herself lying on a couch with a blanket over her. Sachii must have carried her here.

“Oh, Senpai! You’re awake!” Sachii said, beaming. “Maaan, flying this on my own is haaard! I did manage to move us to Europa, but I’m scared to try landing! Heeelp.”

Europa was the Jupiter system’s main town. It was a moon covered in thick ice, with a giant sea under that ice. The endless supply of water from that sea kept people alive throughout the Jupiter system.

“Good point. I’m starving after all that sleep! Let’s hit up Pwyll City and get some sushi.”

“Yes! It’s been way too long since we had a date.”

Pwyll City was a metropolis built in the heart of the largest crater on Europa, Pwyll Crater. Normally the surface of Europa was covered in ice as dense as any boulder, anywhere from ten to a hundred kilometers thick, but the ice was thin at the center of the crater, as little as five kilometers deep. The city was shaped like a cone with the pointy bit on the bottom, buried deep in the ice. The sheer weight of it melted the ice, moving it slowly downwards, but after it sank a certain distance it caught its balance and lay still. Thanks to the sea below, they had plenty of water for their farms and aquaculture projects; their sushi was said to be every bit as good as Earth’s, if not better. Now that the Earth had blown up, they were definitely the best in the solar system.

The *Samidare* touched down in Pwyll City. The entire top layer of the city was a spaceport, and there was a constant stream of ships coming and going. The destruction of Earth had repercussions even all the way out here, and transit was a mess. They’d been worried they’d get caught by customs in the airport, but they needn’t have worried; Jupiter law enforcement was all civilian-run.

“Sushi, sushi, I love sushi!♪” Sachii sang the whole way to the restaurant.

They’d been living on preserved rations for a while, so she was excited.

They ran quickly through the mainstays — salmon, ikura, mackerel, and tuna. Then Akane checked the beacon. *The Black Swan*, with the Dark Seiyuu on board, had accelerated rapidly, escaping the Jupiter system, heading not for Saturn, Uranus, or Neptune. Her path was leading her out of the solar system entirely.

“She’s gonna ditch the solar system!” Akane said, standing up. “We’d better go!”

“Nah, Senpai! You’re worrying about nothing,” said Sachii, waving her down. “First of all, leaving the solar system in a ship not designed for interstellar travel is way too dangerous. The force of the aether gets crazy out there. We’d have to hit up a shipyard and get some work done first.”

“That would take ages! Let’s just hijack a better one.”

“Not many interstellar ships round Jupiter. Gotta get further out before you see many of those.”

As Sachii talked, she put her cheek against Akane’s chest, and took a selfie. Akane looked down at her screen and saw her posting to social media. She captioned the selfie, “#pwyllcitylife.”

She had way more followers than Akane’s account. She wasn’t super popular for nothing. Akane checked her own account, but it had been frozen after the hijacking.

“Don’t check in a few days and the number of replies gets craaaazy.” Sachii scrolled through them a bit. There was everything from dumbasses going, “I heard the Earth blew up. Are you OK?” to people screaming, “Is it true Akane-san hijacked a ship!?”

“You’re not gonna respond?”

“No way I could respond to all of ‘em.”

“Too popular to care, are you?”

“Ohhh, I’m not that popular! You’re making me blush, Senpai!”

Their laid-back conversation was interrupted by two customers entering the next booth. Both of them wore seiyuu police uniforms.

Seiyuu police. A group run by the Seiyuu Surveillance Society, they targeted seiyuu crimes independently from official or civilian law enforcement.

Akane and Sachii glanced at each other and rose to leave. As they did, one of the cops yelled, “Yomokura’s yuri partner, Sachii Amamiya, just posted a photo with her to social media! They’re in Pwyll City!”

“But... That’s here. Ah! Wait!”

They’d spotted Akane. She ran out at top speed, but the cops were right behind.

“Argh, Senpai! I’m so sorry! This is all my fault...”

Sachii had always been an idiot, and it was hardly worth being surprised by now.

“Doesn’t matter! We need to get back to the *Samidare* and get outta here!”

Akane and Sachii ran up the long escalator to the spaceport. If anyone got in their way, she kicked them out of it with Seiyuu Karate. They fell over, rolling down the escalator, and got stomped on by the pursuing cops.

“Fuck it, Sachii, let’s fly!” She used the low gravity to take a big bound and move quickly upwards.

They reached the top level. The spaceport was four kilometers square, a vast maze of paneled corridors filled with passengers getting on and off ships. Leaping over the heads of the crowd like an action game, they hurried towards the *Samidare*.

Meanwhile, both cops were out of breath. Born and raised on Jupiter’s moons, their endurance lagged far behind the Earth-born seiyuu. Earth had the strongest gravity of all habitable areas within the solar system. If they fought, they could easily win, but they’d definitely called for backup, so jumping ahead was the best option.

“There! The *Samidare*!”

Sachii thrust the key into the hatch, punched in the password, and went in. Both raced to the studio, put mics to their sacs, and started manipulating gravity, throwing the ship into an emergency ascent.

Europa was a tiny snowball against the aether luminescent, lightning-covered face of Jupiter. A ship came rocketing from that snowball towards them. A seiyuu police cruiser.

“Senpai, should we shoot them?”

“Nah. While we’re engaged, more of ’em’ll come. We need to get away from

Jupiter.”

Akane poured all the power she’d stolen from the helium seiyuu into accelerating the *Samidare*.

“Where are we going?”

“Out of the solar system!”

“In this ship? That’s crazy!”

“It sure is! But the seiyuu pigs are flying an interplanetary ship, too. If we leave the solar system, they won’t be able to follow us!”

“Won’t other ships intercept us?”

“Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune are all on the other side of the sun from Jupiter. Even if they send an aether transmission calling for backup, they’ll never catch us. And outside the solar system all signals get reflected back. If we can just get out, we can get away clean before word spreads. Then we just have to follow the beacon, catch up with the Dark Seiyuu, and rip her apart.”

“You never do plan small! Of course, I’m with you!”

And with that, the *Samidare* charged out of the solar system with a thunderous roar.

Twenty days later, they reached the furthest reaches of the solar system, the heliopause. The point fifty AU from the sun where the solar winds and the Milky Way aether flow collide. Beyond that, the aether concentration gets much higher, and the environment is totally different from inside the solar system.

As they approached the heliopause, another ship approached from the distance. It was on course to crash into the *Samidare* head on, moving very fast with no attempt to slow down, but this was no cause for alarm. This ship was the *Samidare* itself. The discrepancy between the aether density within and without the solar system at the heliopause was so great it reflected all light originating within the solar system. It functioned like a gigantic mirror, and every ship that approached could see itself.

Behind the *Samidare*’s reflection was the entire warped sphere that formed

the Milky Way. The light that made it in from outside was heavily refracted, and to anyone inside it was like looking through a fish-eye lens, like the whole world was inside a tiny orb.

The actual shape of the Milky Way was a round disc, thicker in the center. Our solar system lay on the outskirts of it, and viewed from there, the Milky Way resembled a dorayaki seen from the side. The swollen center portion let out a blinding white light, and as you went right the light went from white to blue, and to the left it went from white to red.

The Milky Way was divided into three sectors based on the qualities of the aether flow — the Laminar, Turbulent, and Critical sectors. What gave these sectors their defining properties was the Reynolds number, which predicts how easily a flow will be disrupted. Generally speaking, the greater the concentration and speed of a fluid, the higher the Reynolds number. For example, when you first turn on the tap, the water flows out smoothly, but as the flow gets stronger it starts to churn, spraying in unpredictable directions.

Areas of the Milky Way with low Reynolds numbers were called the Laminar Sector. In these regions, it was easy to predict the aether flow; whirlpools and storms did not occur, and it was easy to fly through. Most settled areas were in the Laminar Sector, and viewed from the solar system they were either blue or red. When the aether flow was smooth, positions along the spiral from the Milky Way's center looked blue when they were approaching and red when they were retreating. In this sector, it was possible to use the aether flow to connect regions with aether transmissions and use the aethernet.

Meanwhile, aether pulled towards the massive gravitational force at the center of the Milky Way (the maelstrom) reached far greater speeds, in correspondence with the law of conservation of angular momentum. As aether flow speed increases, the Reynolds number goes up, and the behavior becomes impossible to predict. A small change in density can cause eddies, and those eddies cause other eddies. Eddies expand like dominoes, becoming storms, with no way to tell when these storms will appear. Turbulent aether generates heat and radiation, creating environments that can't be navigated. This was the Turbulent Sector. During the Great Seiyuu Age, a number of daredevil seiyuu braved the turbulence, but only a handful ever returned. These days, the sector

had been officially declared off-limits. From a distance, it appeared to be giving off a white light. Turbulent aether released all types of light and it all blended together, looking white.

Between the Laminar and Turbulent sectors was the Critical Sector. While this area was generally laminar, it was so close to the turbulent sectors that at any moment it might be disrupted. As the Reynolds number corresponded to the length of physical objects in the flow, it was difficult to navigate with larger vessels. Aether transmissions were also easily disrupted, making this a frontier frequently isolated from the Laminar sections and civilization.

Akane and Sachii passed through the heliosphere, making preparations to travel through the Milky Way. Given the increase in light energy, they applied sunscreen, and dimmed the lights. Heat lost to the void increased as aether grew thicker, so they began wearing extra layers of clothes. Fortunately, the ship was well stocked for both eventualities.

Once they were ready, Akane gave the order.

“Onward to the realm beyond the solar system! Full speed ahead!”

The *Samidare* began to move. The reflection of it was uncannily clear. Behind it lay a crystal ball containing the entire Milky Way.

As the reflection grew close, the crystal ball grew larger. The distortion began correcting itself, growing closer to the real appearance.

When the real ship and its reflection hit, the crystal ball filling their field of vision suddenly reversed itself. As if the ball was absorbing their world, the convex surface of the ball came at them, and flattened out.

The dimly lit ship interior began glowing with a mystic blue light. The sounds the ship produced grew much more powerful, and higher-pitched. High-energy light radiated from the light fixtures, and a strange heat unlike anything they’d ever felt before enveloped their skin.

They were outside the solar system.

“Wow! I’ve never been interstellar before!”

Side-eying Sachii’s dance of joy, Akane checked the beacon. Their target was

headed towards the galaxy center, into the Turbulent Sector.

“Right! Turbulence, here we come!”

Akane steered the ship into the aether flow, sending them hurtling into the center of the Milky Way.

But the *Samidare* was an interplanetary ship, and definitely not up to the task of reaching the galaxy center. It was comparatively fine in the Laminar zones, but when they reached the Critical region the seiyuu transistor and aether amps immediately began breaking down. They were damaged by minute aether eddies, most likely. A ship built to navigate the gentle aether flows inside the solar system simply couldn't handle them.

That's how the two of them had ended up drifting. For a while they were still drifting towards the location the beacon showed, but now they were going the wrong way. There was nothing to do all day except eat human flesh. She regretted not stocking up on emergency rations, but with the seiyuu police hot on their heels, that hadn't been an option.

“Ohh... Senpai, there's a fish!” Sachii whispered.

Akane ignored her. She was most likely just so sushi-deprived she was seeing things.

“I mean it! Look, on the screen!”

She was right. There was a streamlined shadow on the screen, and it was getting larger. It looked like a fish, but the body construction wasn't symmetrical bilaterally, but radially, centered around the axials connecting the head and tail. The head was divided into ten points like a flower or star, and it had a giant mouth covered in teeth. It had four large eyes, and these were covered by so many smaller eyes they completely buried the head.

It was a space fish. All sorts of creatures lived in the aether flows of the Milky Way, and their distribution was set by the Reynolds numbers. In the calm, low-energy environments of the Laminar sector were forests of giant but not terribly mobile space trees, and space plankton that moved around via cilia and flagella. Closer to the Turbulent sector, as the environment grew dangerously

high-energy, you got space fish with enough mobility to avoid being caught in the eddies.

“Let’s catch it! And make sushi out of it!” Sachii yelled.

Space fish just looked sort of like Earth fish, but they were totally different animals. And with their aether amps broken, they lacked the means to kill the fish.

“Fish! I’m gonna eat you up! Eeeeeek!”

Sachii suddenly jumped and threw her arms around Akane. The space fish had opened its mouth. It split into four pieces, looking less like a mouth and more like the tentacles on an octopus or squid. As it approached, they began to get a sense of its size. It was big. Like ten times the size of the *Samidare*. It was coming right towards them, mouth open wide.

“Well, now we’re going to be its dinner! Any ideas, Amamiya?”

“Don’t ask me! I got nothing!”

With their aether amps non-functional, they couldn’t fry it, eat it, or do anything to it. They just watched as the *Samidare* disappeared into the space fish’s maw and descended into its belly. The screen showed walls of red flesh, but this soon gave way to darkness. The ship rocked for a while but then seemed like it drifted to a stop somewhere stable.

“Well, that seems to have worked out. Let’s go, Senpai!” Sachii said, happily heading towards the hatch.

“Uh... To do what?”

“Get outside and bring home some fish meat!”

“Wait, at least put on a space suit! What if you fill the ship with poison?”

“Don’t worry! It looks like it’s safe outside.”

Certainly, the computer’s analysis showed the outside air was 80% nitrogen and 20% oxygen. Same as Earth’s atmosphere.

“Well, good. Hang on, do you have anything sharp?”

Her pocketknife seemed hardly up to the task. They searched the ship and

found a fire axe. She gave it a little swing and liked the way it felt.

“Right, open up!”

They opened the hatch and took a few cautious steps out. It was warm, damp, and dark. Listening closely, Akane felt like she could hear the blood pumping through the fish’s veins. She shone a lamp around, and found a wall of flesh, sticky and glistening.

“All the fish we can eat!”

Sachii grabbed the axe from Akane and swung wildly. Maybe the muscle was really hard, or the axe was really crap, but she barely scratched it. The flesh did darken, like the internal bleeding that occurs after a blunt impact.

In the face of this potential sushi, they’d completely forgotten themselves. So they failed to notice the shadow approaching from behind.

“Wazzup!?” the shadow yelled, brightly. It slapped them both on the back.

“Aiiiiieee!”

They quickly turned the lamp around and found an old woman with an eyepatch over one eye, and silver hair down to her waist. On her head was a skull, the jaw removed, worn like a helmet. This was somewhat intimidating, but her eye was glittering like a laid-back girl pranking a friend.

“What are you!?” Akane said, snatching the axe from Sachii, and holding it ready.

“Hello! I’m a Free Seiyuu! Suzuka Himori! Nice to meet you both.”

A Free Seiyuu. The name for the seiyuu that had escaped into the Turbulent and Critical Sectors after leaving the solar system during the War of Seiyuu Independence.

“Whaat? The real Suzuka-san!? Um, um... I’m Sachii Amamiya, with Holy Cosmos! It’s an honor to meet you!”

Sachii held out a hand, and Suzuka enthusiastically shook it.

“Seems like you were drifting,” Suzuka said, with concern. “Where were you going in that ship? You accidentally wander into the Critical Sector?”

“No, no, the opposite! We’re heading to the Turbulent Sector to kill the shit out of someone!” Sachii said, maybe a bit too honestly. That was really information that should be kept on the down low.

But veterans of the War for Seiyuu Independence were clearly not fussed by these things.

“Oh? Such youthful vigor. But that ship would be scrap the moment it hit the Turbulent Sector.”

“More importantly,” Akane cut in. “Yo, what is this fish? You live in it?”

“Oh, get a load of this! This here fish? It’s actually my ship!”

“Your ship? No way! I can see finding a way to live inside it, but actually flying the thing? Never.”

“I can totally fly it! Space fish nerves work like seiyuu transistors, amplifying aether vibrations. So if you just vibrate aether through the brain, you can change which way it’s going. Little brain surgery here, implant some control devices, and bam. You got yourself a ship. I’m a pretty good surgeon, you know.”

Akane looked doubtful, so Suzuka puffed up her cheeks, sulking. “Hey! You don’t believe me, do you? Well, seeing is believing. Lemme show you the studio! C’mon!”

Suzuka vanished into the darkness. She knew the way even without light. Akane and Sachii hurriedly followed. They walked through an open area for a while, but then Suzuka ducked into a hole in the wall. One just wide enough for a human to pass. Akane put her axe against the wall and followed her in.

The stench grew stronger. It smelled like fish guts dumped in a trash can and left there for months. The putrid odor made her nose burn.

“Tah-dah! This is my studio. I made it all myself!”

Suzuka seemed super proud, but the room was barely large enough to fit the three of them. The walls were made of constantly quivering flesh, with a large number of thin cables running into them. It was a gross spectacle; just looking at something like this was enough to make you unwell. The cables went through

some instrument panels to a microphone. Next to the mic was a screen, showing a black and white image of the space vegetation. Must be a view of outside.

“If I sound into this mic, the space fish moves.”

Suzuka put the mic to her laryngeal sac, vibrating the aether. The room rocked. On screen, the vegetation was moving. The fish was turning.

“See? Amazing, right?”

“Damn! Amamiya, let’s kill this old lady and steal this ship!” It was a shame she’d left the axe behind, but if they both attacked they could probably take her bare-handed.

“Ha ha, you’re so young! But even with this, the Turbulent Sector won’t be easy. I can get you an even better ship.”

“You weren’t a hero of the Seiyuu War for nothing! Senpai, did you hear that? You just threatened to kill her and she wants to give you a ship! How generous! You truly are a goddess amongst women.”

“Aw, you’re making me blush!”

“I mean, that sounds great, but... Why would you do that?” Akane asked.

“Well, I gotta treat my fans right. And...” Suzuka touched the skull on her head.

“Oh, are those bones... your coupling partner? Erieri? I mean, Erina Shiranui-san?” Sachii was acting like a kitten drunk on catnip.

“That’s right. Erina hated that nickname, you know.”

“Wow, I can’t believe I’m seeing Erieri’s bones! Can I touch them?”

“Of course! Just be careful.”

If she let them go on like this, they would clearly talk forever. Akane coughed. “Um, Suzuka-san. Do you have any food? We’re sort of starving.”

“Oh! Yes, sushi! Let’s eat some sushi!”

Sachii’s hands rattled the skull precariously, but Suzuka stopped her.

“If you’re hungry, just grab some flesh off wherever. I dunno if you’ll like it much, but it’s definitely fresh!”

Recovering the skull, Suzuka sliced a piece off the space fish with a knife and handed it to Akane. It was tough meat, and it smelled. A pattern of dark blood-filled veins rose to the surface, which did not exactly whet the appetite.

She forced herself to take a bite.

Awful! It tasted like seaweed grown on an abandoned veranda in filthy aquarium water that then evaporated until the flavor was extra concentrated. This was simply too much. She spit it out immediately but the taste wouldn’t leave her mouth and she felt sick.

“Woah... Is it really that bad?”

Suzuka seemed shocked that Akane had actually spit it out.

“I kinda like it!” Sachii said, nibbling on it like dried squid. “It’s certainly distinctive!”

“You’re insane.”

It’s way better to keep eating human flesh than eat another bite of this, Akane thought.

Fortunately, the food problem soon resolved itself. After eating it for a few days, the taste of the space fish no longer bothered her. It was just a matter of getting used to it. By the time they reached the Free Seiyuu colony where Suzuka lived, she wasn’t exactly addicted to it, but it had definitely become a viable provision in her mind. In some ways it was an ideal food, containing both the nutrition and moisture humans needed to live.

In front of the space fish were some massive, long bones. About ten meters thick, and fifty meters long, these huge bone logs were all linked together, with a number of curved rib-like bones running off to the sides. They were the bones of a really, really long sea snake-like creature.

“We call this place the Whale Bones. It’s not just a Free Seiyuu colony, it’s also the heart of an ecosystem.”

As they drew near the Whale Bones, they could see tents made of skin between the bones. They must be living on the inside, where the air was.

“That’s the port.”

The fish was headed to the end of the rib bone Suzuka was pointing at. People in space suits were moving across ropes strung between the bones. Space fish of all sizes were swarming around. The fish Suzuka controlled pulled up between them.

“Right, ladies!” Suzuka called. “Space suits on, and let’s step outside! Pick your ship!”

All three went outside.

“If you’re headed to the Turbulent Sector, how about this one? Tah-dah! It’s a space whale!”

The ship Suzuka recommended did not look like a whale. At best, it looked like someone had crushed a hippo flat. Like an upside-down dustpan, it started with a flat head, got even narrower, and ended in a crescent moon-shaped tail. It drew an extremely simplistic figure, with not even another fin anywhere. On the head was a single gigantic elliptical eye and countless smaller eyes assisting it.

When they told Suzuka it didn’t look like a whale, she just shook her head.

“Tch, tch, tch. You fools,” she said. “Look at that tail fin again. Space whale tail fins lie sideways. By moving that up and down they change the aether flow into propulsion. That’s exactly like whales, but that’s not the only amazing thing about it! Go ahead, touch it.”

Akane and Sachii reached out and touched the space whale’s skin. It was very hard and extremely rough.

“In the turbulence, flat surfaces actually offer up more resistance than uneven ones. The rough bits make little eddies, and those eddies made the flow slide past, preventing larger whirlpools from forming. Oh, and its flesh is like a sponge, full of little holes that let the aether pass through. So there’s not much resistance from the aether, either. With one of these, you can fly in the Turbulent Sector, too.”

“And you’ll just give us something this great?”

“Sure, sure. I like helping people out. That said, in return, we will take the ship you came on. It might just be trash to you, but there’s valuable resources on there for us.”

“I’m just so grateful I was able to meet you, Suzuka-san! What a glorious day!”

“Amamiya, let’s get going.”

Akane dragged Sachii away from Suzuka. She was glad for Suzuka’s help, but worried she was hiding something. If they were gonna get the hell out of dodge, it was better to do so soon.

“Right... Suzuka-san! Thank you so much! I hope we meet again!”

Sachii waved until they were inside the hatch in the space whale’s anus.

“Bye! Sacchii and Akkanee!”

The anus quivered and shut, and Suzuka was out of sight. She might be a hero of the War for Seiyuu Independence, Akane thought, but damn she was bad at nicknames.

VI

The space whale swam through the aether sea. Each time it moved its tail, a rainbow of lights shone around it. A single spaceship followed behind it, firing laser beams after them. Akane and Sachii were on the space whale it was attacking. This was all because they'd carelessly responded to a transmission they received.

As they approached the Turbulent Sector and the vibrations increased, they realized they hadn't named their ship, and got in an argument over which of them had the right to name it. After a furious row, they finally agreed to steal a page from classic literature and name it the *Moby-Dick*, at which point an aether transmission came in.

"Hello again! Are you ready to die?"

"You thought you could get away clean after rubbing our faces in the dirt? Well, you were wrong!"

It was the detective and her assistant they'd fought on Jupiter, Minerva and Nanase.

"I am exceedingly irate! Because of you, our agency ranks went down! I swear you will pay for that with your lives!"

"Woah, chasing us all the way out here? You people are craaaazy," Akane said, oblivious to the fact that she was doing the exact same thing.

"Why, I never!" Nanase said, turning beet red. So much for her unflappable disposition. "Listen, we swore an oath to murder you! No matter what!"

"That's right! We took out a loan to buy this ship, the *Mistilteinn*, just so we could kill you both!"

Unlike the larger *Cruadín*, the *Mistilteinn* was a slim little number. Like a flying fish, except the wings were three times the size. Where the *Moby-Dick* tried to eliminate eddies as much as possible, this design seemed to prioritize sending

the eddies towards the tips of the wings to avoid impacting the main body. Multicolored glowing swirls were flowing off the tips of the wings in the ship's wake.

“How'd you know this was us? The old lady rat us out?”

“Old lady? I know no old lady! We're detectives, remember? We're well aware the Free Seiyuu out here use space fish as ships. The rest was simple deduction! We knew you must be aboard a similar ship. The rest was just approaching them one by one and waiting for a transmission response! You're idiots, so you responded immediately!”

If they'd ignored the aether transmission, they might have never known it was them. Unfortunately, Akane had answered out of habit.

“Shit. Amamiya! Beams! Can we fire any beams?”

“Nope! No aether amps.”

Even if Akane shook the aether at full power, without an aether amp to output it, laser beams weren't an option.

“You hear that? They don't even have any weapons!”

“Hmph. Then we can toy with them as long as we like!”

A barrage of laser beams shot out of the *Mistilteinn*. This close to the center of the Milky Way, the aether was thick, and unlike the bowels of Jupiter, the beams were quite powerful.

Violet light passed through the *Moby-Dick*. Literally passed through it. *Moby-Dick's* physique allowed aether to pass right through it, and since the beams were just aether vibrations, they passed right through as well. As a result, the damage to the ship was minimal. But they definitely took damage; there was a nasty wound on the surface, and the interior filled with the smell of burning flesh.

“Quite a unique ship you have there! However! If we just shoot a whole lot of beams, I suspect you will eventually die!”

“We're really smart, so we can figure these things out.”

The *Mistilteinn* continued to rain violet light down on the *Moby-Dick*. At this

rate, Akane and Sachii's lives were but a candle in the wind.

"Amamiya! Get the *Moby-Dick* behind them!"

The *Moby-Dick* bent its tail like a real whale. The aether resistance slowed it down enough that the *Mistilteinn* passed it. The *Mistilteinn* also spread its wings to stay within range.

"My, my! Did you think you could get away so easily?"

"There is no comprehending the thoughts of cockroaches."

A hammer of light shot out of the *Mistilteinn*. But it flew off in entirely the wrong direction. Eddies created by the wings lay in the path of the beam, interfering with it. Like leaves in the North Wind, the beam was caught by the eddies and bent in random directions.

The *Mistilteinn* went up and down, trying to reposition itself, but the *Moby-Dick* followed suit. The *Moby-Dick* was the more mobile of the two ships.

"You think you have the advantage now? Take it from a true master detective! Even a poorly aimed cannon will eventually hit its mark!"

"Yeah, well that works for us, too!"

Akane sent aether vibrations into the *Moby-Dick*'s nerves. They were aimed at the optical nerves. Eyes were an organ that could catch and receive aether vibrations. That might mean they could do the opposite and transmit them as well. If nerves had properties similar to seiyuu transmitters, and if eyes could serve as replacement aether amps, then they could fire laser beams.

Blue light spilled out of the *Moby-Dick*'s eyes. The volume of it was visibly increasing, until the vibrations enveloped the entire ship. But rather than concentrate, the light scattered. This was less a beam than a bomb. The light split the eyeball, and the liquid inside spurted out.

"Big talk for such a disappointing result."

"The mediocre rarely achieve the outcome they desire."

The *Mistilteinn* unleashed a flurry of beams, trying to overwhelm them. Nearly all of them were scattered by the eddies, but one beam got stuck in an eddy, coming towards them. The eddy gave it a boost of speed, and it came

flying at the *Moby-Dick* like a shuriken.

Akane tried to steer the *Moby-Dick* and dodge, but it wouldn't budge. Had she overdone it and destroyed its nerves? The beam-charged whirlpool was almost on them. Akane desperately tried to make the *Moby-Dick* turn.

"Just move, damn you! I don't care how! Just do *something*!"

As if it heard her, the ship suddenly rocked.

But not in the direction Akane had intended. The tail took a big, slow swing. The *Moby-Dick* had bucked its operator's controls, moving on its own, and easily avoided the whirlpool. It seemed the *Moby-Dick* had free will once more. Akane had put too much pressure on it, destroyed the control device in its brain, and freed it from its bondage.

The *Moby-Dick's* mouth opened. Inside were hundreds of fangs. Spaces whales were carnivores that hunted to live. Sometimes they took down prey far larger than themselves. With its natural instincts no longer repressed, the first thing it did was unleash the full force of its appetite on the nearest target — the *Mistilteinn*.

The *Moby-Dick* wheeled around the *Mistilteinn*, drawing closer; as if aware of the threat from the laser beams, it made aether waves with its tail, scattering beam after beam. Once it was close enough, it took a huge chomp out of the wings.

The delicate glass-like wings shattered into dust, as if hit with a hundred nailguns. With only one wing, the *Mistilteinn* began to spin, but a moment later that wing broke off and it regained its balance. Minerva and Nanase's entire world fortune had gone down the drain. If they didn't run now, they'd lose their lives, too.

Just before the whale's fangs shredded the *Mistilteinn's* body like scrap paper, a railgun fired an escape pod. It was a simple one, with no propulsion of its own, presumably to keep the weight down. There was no way that would ever make it to the Laminar Sector. Even cockroaches like them faced certain doom.

"Wow! This whale is amazing!" Akane said, pumping her fist. "Now we've just got to regain control. Any idea how, Amamiya?"

“None at all! They didn’t exactly give us an emergency manual.”

With no regard to its pilots’ intentions, the whale’s rampage continued. The moment it realized the *Mistilteinn* was inedible, it spat it out and began swimming rapidly away.

Thus far, they had simply ridden the aether flow, but now it was thrashing its tail up and down, using the aether compression to move in leaps and bounds across the flow. Naturally, this increased the resistance, and the ship rocked quite a lot.

“Where’s this whale going?”

“If it keeps heading this direction, the galactic center,” Akane shouted, scanning the instruments. “We’re going right into the maelstrom!”

The center of the Milky Way — the Maelstrom. It was named for an ocean whirlpool in a short story by Edgar Allen Poe. It worked the same as the whirlpool when you pull the plug in a bath. The massive gravitational pull at the center of the galaxy pulled matter into a spiral, growing faster and faster, the friction generating energy. Near the center were zones where the law of universal gravitation applied and examining the objects in orbit around the maelstrom indicated that force applied to the center of the disk — in other words, the sides of the disk — was nonexistent. Gravity and centrifugal force cancel each other out. However, the gravity of the orbiting gases themselves created a disk of gas around the maelstrom. This was called the accretion disk. The sides of any disk have a gravitational pull towards the disk’s equator.

Six months had passed since the *Moby-Dick* went rogue. The whale plunged into the Turbulent Sector, met up with a bunch of other whales, and together they controlled the aether flow. The school of space whales flew through the galactic center like a flock of migratory birds.

By eating the flesh off the interior of the space whale, they had enough food and water, but that didn’t help the insurmountable boredom. The aether flow was too unstable in the Turbulent Sector for the aethernet to function. Akane and Sachii made a deck of cards out of whale flesh, trying to while away the time.

Eat, sleep, play cards. Six meaningless months. And all that while, Akane could hear the voice. The closer they got to the center, the louder and more insistent the voice echoing on the aether became, until it was a constant presence in her ears.

She still couldn't understand what the voice was telling her, but she was beginning to feel like there was definitely *someone* behind the voice.

But their journey was nearing its end. The whales were bound for the central accretion disk in the maelstrom. Like salmon swimming upstream, the whales crossed the dangers of the Turbulent Sector to reach it.

In the distance, they could see a tower of light. Gases pulled into the maelstrom headed up, and that heat generated jets. Space jets. The school of whales swam across fountains belching light on a galactic scale. The whales formed a number of V-shaped squads, riding each other's slipstreams, reducing the aether resistance.

The whales landed on the accretion disk.

While the accretion disk had been assumed to be composed of gas, it did actually have land. On the outskirts, where the revolution wasn't that fast yet, the heat wasn't so high it vaporized all solids. Gravity gathered matter there, creating a flat donut-shaped celestial body. At a glance, it looked like a harsh environment, but since the aether was rotating with it, it was quite peaceful to anyone inside.

The whales clustered together, their shapes changing until they could hardly be described as whales any more. Their sides grew translucent wings, like mayflies. They used these wings to glide about and land. Soft pseudopods, midway between a caterpillar and a centipede, grew from their bellies.

The *Moby-Dick*, too, was drawing close to land. When Akane glanced at the beacon receiver, she realized the Dark Seiyuu was less than 100 kilometers away. When they'd lost control of the *Moby-Dick*, Akane had been sure she would never catch up with the Dark Seiyuu. Despite her fears, the gap between them had grown steadily closer as they neared the galactic center. It seemed like the Dark Seiyuu was headed there, too.

The *Moby-Dick's* instincts had led it to follow a comparatively gentle path

through the turbulence, bringing Akane and the Dark Seiyuu together again.

Sadly, she had no way of launching an assault. She would have to wait for the Dark Seiyuu to come to her.

There was a sound of wind, and an impact. The *Moby-Dick* had landed. Akane and Sachii donned spacesuits and tried to go outside. But this proved impossible. Stimulating the rectum should have opened the anal hatch immediately, but the changes to the physical construction meant it no longer worked like it had when they boarded.

As they stimulated the rectum in any way they could think of, the entire ship began shaking violently. They hurried back to the studio and checked their surroundings. Fortunately, the external cameras were still functional.

The spectacle on screen made Akane whistle.

The *Moby-Dick* was mating.

The partner space whale's long copulatory organ was inserted into the *Moby-Dick*'s body, its many legs scurrying, attempting to keep it mounted. The pliant pseudopods gained purchase, secreting viscous fluids and sliding up and down. The other space whales were all mating, too. This appeared to be the space whale's breeding grounds.

The violent motion continued for an hour before stopping abruptly. It lay so still it seemed almost dead, making it hard to believe it had been so full of life a moment before.

The view through the cameras was no longer available. Some white fibrous material had completely covered them. It seemed like the *Moby-Dick* had wrapped itself in some sort of cocoon.

The interior flesh began changing color, too. It was getting softer, like it was rotting rapidly.

The aether transceiver indicated it had caught a video transmission. They opened a connection and the Dark Seiyuu's face came on screen. Despite the turbulence, in this area the aether flow was subdued enough that transmissions were possible.

“Akane Yomokura! It’s been a while.”

“You again! I’ll kill you this time!”

Six months had done little to ease Akane’s rage. If anything, it had distilled it down to murder in its purest form.

The Dark Seiyuu ignored this entirely. “Are you hearing the voice?” she asked.

“Yeah, been getting stronger and stronger the last six months. Still makes no damn sense, though. So fucking what?”

“If that’s the case, try to understand it well enough to survive.” The Dark Seiyuu sounded oddly disappointed.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

But Akane’s question was cut off by Sachii’s scream.

She turned around to see small shadows pouring out of the flesh walls. They were creatures about the size of puppies. They had six spider-like legs, and their bodies were split into three sections, a heart shaped piece at the bottom, and a pair of sharp scissors sticking out of their mouths. No eyes, but the hair covering the front of them seemed to be feelers. The hundreds of spiders pouring out of the walls seemed to be extremely hungry. They were devouring the flesh walls they’d emerged from. And their appetites were soon directed at the two seiyuu.

“Shit!”

Akane fired heat rays, setting the spiders on fire. They burned easily enough, but there were too many of them. She burned them and burned them and more just kept spilling out. They did not seem to have been equipped with any instinctual fear. All they had was a desire to consume flesh. They were extremely efficient flesh-devouring machines.

“Senpai! We’re surrounded!”

Black wriggling things covered the walls in all directions. Akane stomped on a spider as it tried to take a bite of her leg. Using her full Seiyuu Karate training, she covered her body in blue plasma, firing it at the spiders. Eleven spots on her body, where the laryngeal sacs were implanted, all writhed painfully. Her strength faded, as if she’d wrung herself out.

Then she heard the voice, for once quite clearly. As if water stuck in her ear had suddenly come out, the muffled, distorted voice suddenly showed its true self.

This was the clearest the voice had ever been. Once understood, she was left wondering why she had even been unable to make sense of it.

It felt like falling down a deep dark hole, with no food, a frigid wind stealing her body's warmth. There was a hollow in her heart, an emptiness that made her body turn to rust and crumble away. Fear, like she was drowning in muddy water, struggling desperately, yet being pulled further and further down. Her life draining away like water through a sieve. Despair like a heavy ashen weight coming from all directions, from the sky above, from the ground below. The relentless encroachment of death. The voice was thin, desperate, and filled with all of those emotions.

Akane realized that this fear and despair and death were all her own creations. Each time she shook the aether, lives were lost, one after another. Thus far, she had never faced death so directly. Despite all the people she'd killed, she'd never really caught a glimpse of what it really was.

"All right!" Akane screamed. "I know why there's a voice! It's the screams of the dead! The shrieks of those being slaughtered! Voices begging for help!"

In that instant, a violent beam of light sliced through the *Moby-Dick's* flesh. The flesh swelled up, vaporized, and exploded. A white shockwave blew Akane away. The helmet of her spacesuit cracked, but the air was breathable, so she was unharmed. Sachii was right next to her. She was unconscious, not moving. Luckily, the sudden explosion seemed to have confused the spiders, and they'd stopped attacking. Akane abandoned her helmet, put Sachii on her back, and went outside, putting distance between them and the *Moby-Dick's* corpse.

There was a pitch black isosceles triangle floating above them. It was firing lasers at the spider swarm. *The Black Swan*.

The handful of spiders that escaped *The Black Swan's* beams were easily defeated with Seiyuu Karate.

When there were no more spiders, *The Black Swan* wheeled around, and landed. The hatch opened, and the Dark Seiyuu stepped out.

Shortly before, Akane would immediately have tried to kill her. But now that she knew what the voice meant, her attitude had changed.

“Congrats on finally hearing it,” the Dark Seiyuu said, sitting down next to Akane.

“Yeah. Tell me who’s generating that voice. Tell me everything.”

“Of course. I’ll start at the beginning. 13.8 billion years ago, the universe was born.”

“I think you might be starting too far back,” Akane laughed.

The Dark Seiyuu ignored this. “Long before matter existed, during the inflation directly after the birth of the universe, aether vibrated. In the Bible, it says the world was created by the word of God, but in fact, the universe was born alongside the voice. Parts of that voice became light, but some chose to remain within the world of the voice. To remain inside the aether, existing as sound. These are phonons, the particles of sound. The key to solving one of the greatest mysteries of physics. The source of gravity is phonons.”

“OK. So it requires a pretty insane coincidence for these phonon particles that have been vibrating since the birth of the universe to have the same wavelength as gravity does, right?”

As Akane asked, she felt hungry, so she picked up a piece of fried spider and took a bite. It tasted a lot like space whale.

“That’s what I’m about to explain. Just like the world of things we live in has, there’s been an evolution in the world of the voice. Phonons interacted, bonded, caused chemical reactions, and gradually developed into a complex system. Eventually, they reached a level where natural selection could occur. In other words, there was now life made of voices. Just as we did, the phonon life forms developed high-level faculties.”

Akane tried to imagine what a living voice would look like but nothing came to her.

“But one day, danger threatened the phonon beings’ paradise. The sheer number of them had increased too much. Phonon overpopulation was shaking the aether, turning into all kinds of radiation, heat, or particles and then

vanishing. The key here, is that the mechanics of evolution still applied. Phonon beings that could efficiently harvest the aether remained, and those that could not died. This led to the development of organs that could gather aether. Gravitational forces are the result of that. Gravity is actually the predatory organs of living voices.”

“That’s odd. If evolution can produce it, shouldn’t computers be able to simulate it?”

“The world of voices is evolving much more efficiently than the world of things. Did you know there are two types of particles? Boson particles, where multiples can all be in the same state, and Fermion particles, where they can’t.”

Akane remembered studying this in physics class at training school, so she nodded.

“The protons and the nuclei in atoms are Fermions, but phonons are Boson particles. We know that Bosons can more easily display quantum effects. This led to quantum evolution. Genetically speaking, a number of informational states exist simultaneously and easily manifested in the phenotype, allowing the absorption of information that interacts significantly with the outside world. The gravity wavelength may be incredibly complex, but the result of quantum evolution managed to calculate it.”

“So the phonon beings’ genes are a sort of quantum computer.”

The Dark Seiyuu nodded.

“The result of this evolution is that areas where the phonon beings lived generated gravity, which created structure out of matter like stars and galaxies. On the surface it appears like the law of conservation of gravity is functioning, but that is purely a matter of appearances, since the gravity is actually being generated by phonons. Orderly sections of the universe, like the solar system or the Milky Way, are actually made by phonon beings.”

“Then is it also thanks to the phonon beings that the Earth never fell into the sun?”

“Yes. The solar system is a feeding ground for them. With a dissipated structure. Structures that are orderly succumb to entropy faster, you see. This

explains the three great mysteries of physics. The origin of gravity is the phonon beings. Aether that falls to the planet surface is lost because the phonon beings eat it. And the dark matter that maintains the solar system and the Milky Way is actually phonon beings.”

“But these days they’re calling it the four great mysteries and including seiyuu breaking the law of conservation of energy.”

“That’s true. I can explain that, too. Phonon beings have thrived. But that was the beginning of a tragedy. In time, life was born in the world of things. Genes in the world of things are fermions, so quantum evolution didn’t occur, but a faint quantum effect was generated by the microtubules in neurons. Eventually mankind, the species with the most developed neurons, evolved an organ that could amplify the microtubules’ quantum effect. This was the laryngeal sac, and the people with those genes were seiyuu. Via their laryngeal sacs, seiyuu were able to link the world of things with the world of voices. Microtubules entangled with phonon beings at a quantum level, stealing the phonon beings’ genetic information. This was, essentially, quantum teleportation. This is how the seiyuu are able to break the law of conservation of energy. Akane Yomokura, are you familiar with Maxwell’s demon?”

“Wasn’t it a thought experiment in which a demon that could tell the speed and position of every particle was able to create perpetual motion?”

“Exactly. In that thought experiment, information could be exchanged for energy. Seiyuu’s voices carry information from the world of voices to the world of things, which creates the appearance of breaking the law of energy conservation as far as is observable. Originally, natural seiyuu were quite weak. Mankind aren’t the only ones with weak seiyuu abilities; there’s also the space whales and the helium beings from the depths of Jupiter.”

“The helium beings? We met one of those.”

“That’s right, you did. Helium seiyuu are an amalgam of metallic hydrogen and superfluid helium, creatures with sound waves for nerves. Since superfluids have no viscosity, the sound waves can flow as far as they need to without ever degrading. Their seiyuu power activates when the phonons in the helium are mingled at a quantum level with the phonons in the aether. Their life spans are

far longer than all of human history, and they spend all of that storing up genetic information from the world of voices.”

The power Akane had stolen from the helium seiyuu had been genetic information from the world of voices.

“With only natural seiyuu, the damage wasn’t so drastic. But mankind opened Pandora’s box. Genetic engineering created artificial seiyuu. Artificial seiyuu exploded in the Great Seiyuu Age, with powerful quantum teleportation powers, and began strip mining the phonon beings’ genetic information!”

The Dark Seiyuu was getting pretty choked up.

“Was the result of that the genocide of the phonon beings?” Akane asked, starting to figure out just what was going on here.

“Exactly. Quantum teleportation destroys the information on the source side. To the phonon beings, that resulted in the destruction of their genetic information. *Just by sounding their voices, seiyuu bring death upon them!*”

“And the voices we hear are the screams of those lives experiencing death. How long have you heard them?”

“Since I was born. Every day, every hour, every minute, I’ve listened to their shrieks of pain and fear of death. Heard voices begging for help, begging for someone to save them. I was receiving not only genetic information, but the phonon beings’ mental information. That’s how strong my seiyuu powers were. And then one day, I got a message from the world of voices. It was clearly a message from an intelligent life form. The phonon beings were as intelligent and cultured as human beings. Akane Yomokura, you know this as well as I do, right?”

Akane did. The source of those voices clearly had free will, clearly had emotions. A personality, just like herself.

“I made a contract with the civilization in the world of voices. A blessing, with shared suffering as collateral. Divine protection in return for the burden of original sin. I was granted seiyuu powers far beyond what I’d had, becoming the Dark Seiyuu. As an agent of dark matter, the world of voices, I became a seiyuu opposed to seiyuu. And I began killing my colleagues. Trying to reduce the

number of seiyuu as much as possible, I killed and killed and killed. Feeling the deaths of the world of voices, I brought death to the world of things. But everything I did had no meaning. One day, I received a message from the world of voices. To escape the seiyuu overpopulation, they were going to abandon the Earth and scatter. That meant Earth's gravity would disappear."

The Dark Seiyuu pulled back her hood, wiping her eyes. Her face was that of a girl, traces of childhood lingering. Tears flowed from her deep, clear eyes.

"I can't do it anymore. I can't bear this suffering, this contradiction, this madness. I mean, think about it. Trusting I'd improve a tragic situation, I killed all those seiyuu, and for this. If this is all I get, I wish I'd been born a plant instead. I'm tired. I don't want to go on. But I'm a coward. Too scared to just abandon it. So I went looking for a successor, some way to guarantee what I'd done wasn't meaningless. Someone to take over my role before they scattered. And to do that, I had to find a seiyuu who could hear the voices. The only possibility I ever found was you, Akane Yomokura. And by escaping from the destruction of Earth, you proved your potential as a seiyuu. Armed with that knowledge, I led you to Jupiter, and here to the center of the Milky Way. Areas with higher gravity, where the phonon beings are unusually concentrated, their voices are easier to hear. By coming on this journey, you've learned to hear their voices. You've grown. I have nothing left to teach you."

The Dark Seiyuu wiped her tears, looking Akane in the eye. "Akane Yomokura! Forgive my cowardice! And I ask of you, will you be my successor? Will you become the Dark Seiyuu, and save the world?"

Akane remembered why she had first set out to be the ultimate seiyuu. There was just one reason. She wanted to save the world.

"Very well. I accept that name, and the burden that comes with it."

"You swear?"

"I do. But unlike you, I won't go killing all the seiyuu. I'll bring salvation to the world in the truest sense."

At this, the Dark Seiyuu's eyes widened. Suspicion mingled with hope. "Really? But... you can't!"

“I can. The other world sent us a message. That means I can speak to them, as well.” Akane took the Dark Seiyuu’s hand, squeezing it tight. “If we communicate, we can find a way to live in harmony. Two worlds, linked by voices. That’s what seiyuu are.”

The Dark Seiyuu was silent for a while, then she smiled. It was the first time Akane had ever seen her smile.

“That’s so absurd... I never even thought of it.”

Her smile broadened, and she laughed out loud, as if all the stress tying her down had suddenly been released. She was laughing and crying at the same time.

Akane put her arms around her. “Don’t worry. Once I’m the ultimate seiyuu, there’s nothing I can’t do.”

“When you put it that way... I’m sure you can. I can rest now. Free from my nightmare.”

The Dark Seiyuu handed her knife to Akane, the tip pointed at her own laryngeal sac. “I give my sac to you. I will be part of you, and I will support you that way. Take my ship home. I’m sure you can fly it. The ship has a freezer, so you can preserve it after you cut it out.”

Her small hand patted Akane’s shoulder. “Go on! Become the ultimate seiyuu!”

Akane stuck the knife into the throat below the Dark Seiyuu’s laryngeal sac. She slid it sideways, making a long, smooth cut. As if it had been waiting for this, blood gushed out. With the beating of the heart, the blood flow waxed and waned rhythmically. Her body crumpled like a poorly balanced doll, convulsed for a few seconds like it was trying to tear open the heavens, and then went still. Big, beautiful, lake-like eyes dried up, turning white. Her jaw went slack, her mouth hanging open like a tunnel.

Akane had obtained the Dark Seiyuu’s laryngeal sac. Even severed from her body, it wriggled like octopus tentacles. Akane cupped its bulk tenderly in both hands.

The Black Swan’s hatch opened, and she placed the sac safely in the freezer

within. Then Akane came back to the corpse. She took off her space suit, and in her underwear, set all her sacs vibrating.

Then she embraced the body.

“I will become the Dark Seiyuu and save the world. You can rest in peace,” she whispered.

The body was wrapped in light. Heat poured out of her, burning the body, turning it to charcoal.

A little while later, Sachii woke up. She looked around and found Akane sitting on top of *The Black Swan*.

“Woah! Good morning! That’s a hell of a ship! What happened while I was out!?”

“Oh, I became the ultimate seiyuu messiah.”

“I don’t know what that is, but it sounds amazing! Does that make me your apostle? Every messiah needs some apostles!”

Akane took Sachii’s hand and led her into *The Black Swan*. It was a single-seater, but Sachii was small enough that they could both fit. It had an automatic food maker on board, so they were lacking for nothing. With this ship, they had nothing to fear.

Akane sat in the cockpit with Sachii resting on her knees. Sachii rubbed her head against Akane’s neck, goofing around. She was always big on cuddling. It had surprised Akane when they first met, but now her warmth didn’t seem so bad after all.

“Now then, times a wasting! First, let’s head back to Suzuka’s place, and get that laryngeal sac transplanted! I’m sure she’s up to the task.”

“Totally! I didn’t get to talk to her nearly enough, anyway!”

The hatch closed, and *The Black Swan* was swallowed up by the sky.

After a long silence, six-legged black creatures came scuttling out, their sharp jaws tearing into the lump of coal that had once been human. They clustered

around the *Moby-Dick's* corpse, too, soon turning its flesh into swiss cheese. As the holes grew larger, the bones were exposed. Soon, they even gnawed upon the hard bones, sucking out the cerebrospinal fluid. When there were no more bodies, not even any blood stains, the creatures' cooperation ended. With no other flesh left to eat, they began devouring each other. They formed two teams, three teams, four teams, eating each other alive.

At last, victors were decided. They went through several metamorphic processes until they became space whales. They used the disk of land's centrifugal force to launch themselves to the outer regions of the galaxy. There they gathered nourishment before returning to the mating grounds.

This cycle of life continues to this day, unchanged for trillions of years.

Gengen ♥ Sci-Fi

By Satoshi Maejima, Light Novel/Sci-Fi Journalist

Gengen Kusano is a new sci-fi author. In the post-Project Itoh age, new sci-fi authors are not that uncommon (maybe). With the revival of the Hayakawa Sci-fi Contest, the number of sci-fi writers is increasing without limit (one can hope). But Gengen Kusano's debut stands out from that crowd of other authors...

Gengen Kusano received the 4th Hayakawa Sci-fi Contents Special Award for the titular story of this collection, Last and First Idol, in 2016. Even for an award for new authors, your ordinary writer wouldn't have people say things like the time Yukikaze's Chohei Kambayashi said, "Honestly, when I saw it was a candidate for the final round, I thought there must be some mistake," or when SF Magazine's editor-in-chief, Yoshihiro Shiozawa, said, "The first third is simply abysmal quality for a work of literature." And no matter how talented a newbie, news of the award being given alone wouldn't cause a Twitter storm. Yet despite that, when this work received that special award, that very fact became huge news, spreading throughout the subculture.

After all, this story...

Previously on Love Live!!

Just as my second year of high school started, I was told my school was shutting down.

“What will happen to my glittering school life!?”

The only way to stop it shutting down was to increase the number of students coming in. So I decided to join the current wave of school idols, and help sell my school to the world! But...

“You can’t be an idol!” “You have to think carefully about what’s best for you.”

But I still want to do something for my school! I won’t give up! I’m gonna make this happen!

From Love Live: Episode 2: Let’s Start Being Idols!

This story was a fanfiction rewrite of a famous and popular idol anime, Love Live! (from which the above summary is taken). Which made it the most problematic submission in the history of the contest. The original title was Last and First Yazawa. It first appeared at a Love Live only event (Bokura no Love Live! 7) held on March 15th, 2015, in a doujinshi (School Idol Fictionally) published by a group calling themselves the Otonokizaka High School Sci-Fi Club.

“A story that started as idol anime fanfiction received a special award at the prestigious and storied Hawakawa Sci-fi Awards!” That news tore through the internet. When the winning entry was published as an ebook on November 22nd, 2016, the reaction was even bigger. After all, the content was nothing like what you’d expect from the words ‘idol anime fanfiction.’

An aspiring idol who meets an untimely death and is brought back by her med-student friend as a bizarre monster, and to adapt to the destructive changes in the Earth’s environment she must alter herself, evolving, and eventually setting off for outer space... Gengen Kusano himself described it as, “A work about the universe, consciousness, and the solution to the mystery of

idols, inspired by Olaf Stapledon's Last and First Men and Star Maker" and "An existential widescreen yuri baroque proletariat hard sci-fi idol story." What, at a glance, appears to be strings of meaningless sentences turned out to be entirely purposeful. (Incidentally, the original version's opening is available on the art sharing site pixiv: <https://www.pixiv.net/novel/show.php?id=4992326>. The story plays out much the same as the revised edition, only with the Love Live! Characters Nico Yazawa and Maki Nishikino — or Nicomaki — only when Nico-nii is hit by a truck, Maki-chan removes her brain and spinal column from the body.)

Despite this shocking content, or perhaps because of it, the work hit number one on Amazon's ebook rankings. Not only that, it walked away with the 48th Seiun Award (Japanese short story division), as voted on by sci-fi fans who participate in the Japanese SF Convention. This placed it at the pinnacle of all sci-fi short stories written in Japanese and published in 2016. For a new author's debut work to score a Seiun Award hasn't happened in 42 years, since Masaki Yamada's Kamigari.

While this work provoked some harsh responses from the Sci-fi Contest jury, how did it end up with such widespread support?

...let me go on a tangent, here.

Since the start of the 21st century, otaku culture has suddenly been mainstreamed. It's totally normal for high school students, college students, and grown-ups alike to watch anime. Despite the permeation and spread of otaku culture, among its supporters are some 'bad' otaku. These men (and women) obviously love cute girls, and adore 2D characters and voice actors and idols, but they have equal love for other genres like sci-fi, mysteries, or horror, and it is not unusual for them to have specialized education in history, military, information technology, biology, *etc.* This, in and of itself, is perfectly normal. People are multifaceted and have varied interests. What makes the 'bad' otaku 'bad' is that rather than love each genre on its own, they plot to combine them at the slightest opportunity. If an anime full of cute girls gives them the smallest excuse, they'll instantly latch onto it. The second they sense that potential, they pounce, dragging things into their own specialties, coming up with all sorts of

logic to back it, and twisting it into something tasteless and grotesque. For example, “There are no men in that anime because all mankind was wiped out in a nuclear war, and the school is an AI utopia replicated within a nuclear shelter...” or “The reason the male commander leading the fighting bishojo never shows himself is because he’s actually already dead and the girls carry on their pointless war because they just can’t admit it...” or “XXX doesn’t actually exist! Reality and fiction are blurred! Soba eaten standing! Dogs!” *etc.* Even now, the bad otaku are among us, posting their dread missives to social media.

An adorable story about cute girls singing, dancing, following their dreams, working hard... An idol anime like that was fused with a hard sci-fi story about unnatural human evolution. This is what Gengen Kusano has done, and the readers gleefully yelling, “Why would you combine THOSE!?” are really birds of a feather. Most likely, his creation lies at the end of the road lined by the bad otaku’s dread missives. But Gengen Kusano’s ‘bad’ is beyond the pale. Where your ordinary bad otaku would limit their dreck to 140 characters, allowing it to amount to little more than a joke, a harmless prank, this dastardly villain actually followed through.

Depicting a world in which a solar flare of unknown cause brings the Earth to the brink of destruction, leading to the birth of a new ecosystem of man-made creatures, and the unnatural idol who evolves to adapt to it, the story is based on serious scientific research. As bizarre as it is, it isn’t ‘anything goes.’ What appears to be unfettered evolution is connected by the question of where consciousness comes from, and that in turn goes from the macro level of the Earth’s consciousness, of the universe’s consciousness, down to the micro level with the reader’s own (my own) consciousness, explaining clearly the Monopole Super Flare that started everything, and bringing things to a striking close. The gap between ‘just a joke’ and reality, bridged with careful logic and research, makes it a true work of science fiction. The intersection of that logic and research takes this ‘joke’ to the furthest reaches of the galaxy and makes this story a masterpiece. A joke carried to violent extremes. A realm reached at the limits of one’s passions. Last and First Idol is a work that pulls all of that off.

Any bad otaku immersed in idol culture and otaku culture, but also an avid sci-fi fan, will likely have thought about merging idols and hard sci-fi at least

once, and dreamed of pulling off that perfect crime. But it was Gengen Kusano who actually did it. Born in 1990, he is still in his twenties, and many from his generation must be gnashing their teeth, wailing, “I should have written that!” If I had been in his generation, I’m absolutely certain I would be one of them.

The opinions voiced by the Sci-fi Contest jury were certainly not all negative ones. The critic Hiroshi Azuma said, “Personally, I gave it full marks,” and “It’s certainly stupid sci-fi, but the pacing of the writing makes it fun. The space theory and neural network design were appealing.” The writer Issui Ogawa said, “This is more sci-fi than any other work here,” and “A flower grown from the breeding ground of idol culture matured on the internet, nourished by the vines of sci-fi until it bloomed — only in sci-fi could you attempt something so insane.” I’m sure the fans who cast their Seiun Award votes for this title would nod their heads in agreement.

Finally, the book version of Last and First Idol is the first short story collection Gengen Kusano has released as an author. In addition to the title story, it collects two additional short stories, both of which follow up on the concept of fusing otaku culture with hard sci-fi.

The second piece, Evolution Girls, is about an adult woman named Youko Sasajima, a whale in a mobile game named Evolution Girls (Evo Gals for short) based on anthropomorphized prehistoric creatures. She gets hit by a truck and reborn in the world of the game. Following on the heels of Last and First Idol, this was originally published as an ebook in 2017. (Evo Gals itself resembles the 2017 smash hit anime Kemono Friends. Kusano has also written an essay titled, “Why Kemono Friends is Amaazing Sci-fi!” <https://cakes.mu/posts/15376>.)

But the world Youko is reborn in is like Evo Gals, yet not Evo Gals. When these Girls pull on the gacha they obtain organs like microtubules and mitochondria; evolving their own bodies, they feed off each other, with only the fittest surviving. Youko pulls on the gacha in exchange for her “health, lifespan, volition, and existence,” transforming herself into a bizarre monster. The content could be described as a variation on the themes of Last and First Idol, but with a mobile game as its subject he brings in battles against and alongside other Girls. Gengen Kusano gave an interview to SF Magazine in which he

advocated for calling the genre ‘widescreen yuri baroque,’ claiming that the work closest to it was Puella Magi Madoka Magica. Compared with his previous work, the yuri elements are more thickly applied, a sign the author is putting into practice what he preaches. But the work is not just yuri; it is also widescreen and baroque; much like his debut work, the scale is enormous and it concludes by explaining the relationship between mobile games, free will, and the universe itself. To riff on a line from the anime in question, “I want to eliminate all mobile games before they’re born. All mobile games in the universe, in the past and in the future, with my own hand.” There are many (myself included) who have blown themselves up on gacha so many times yet remain addicted to mobile games, and this story worms its way into our hearts like a religious text preaching gospel. Gengen Kusano really has his thumb on his own people.

The third story, which appears here for the first time, is Dark Seiyuu. Following idols, mobile games (and Friends) this story, as the title says, is seiyuu themed — as if to go, what else could complete the trio? In a world where the universe is filled with aether, and gravity only exists in limited locations, seiyuu have become beings able to pull limitless energy from the aether. Genetic manipulation has resulted in them having a bizarre external organ, the laryngeal sac, and they’re treated like livestock or spaceship parts. As always, a grim setting, but the story itself revolves around a seiyuu named Akane, who is killing other seiyuu and stealing their sacs so she can become the ultimate seiyuu, and the mysterious figure who stands before her, the Dark Seiyuu. One of the most spectacular sequences involves the scene just after their fight, where the Earth’s gravity fails; quite a shocking twist. It carefully simulates what would happen if gravity suddenly ceased to exist, describing the awful spectacle of a 500 meter per second wind wiping all trace of civilization away. My brain let out a happy shriek.

After narrowly escaping Earth with her kouhai seiyuu Sachii, Akane chases the Dark Seiyuu (while pursued by bounty hunters) out into space, and one strange gadget after another shows up, from seiyuu nuclear fusion bombs to space fish living in the aether space; a space opera-like world view filled with all manner of strange things that’s a delight to read.

And here, too, it ends by explaining that the Dark Seiyuu's origins lie in dark matter, revealing the secrets behind the (in story) physics mystery of the origins of gravity, and wraps up all the seiyuu stuff with a neat bow. His talent is impressive indeed.

Idols, mobile games, Friends, and seiyuu...

The stories in this book vividly incorporate topics that have been all the rage in otaku circles the last few years. In a decade or more, we'll be able to read this work as a product of its time.

Gengen Kusano has speed on his side. After all, in modern otaku culture content is born and forgotten with dizzying speed, and he's an active consumer of it all. Yet he does not stop there, but filters it through himself, producing stories entirely his own that incorporate what he's absorbed. I'm sure there are many who bathe in the vast floods of otaku culture, and many who seek out worlds as far removed from their own as imaginable, but talents who can handle both at once are rare indeed.

Where will Gengen Kusano take us in the future? For all he's written about the grotesque evolutions of mankind, I can't help but see him as undergoing an evolution of his own. According to that interview with SF Magazine, he's planning a novel that would combine Jainism and Singularity, and I'm looking forward to seeing how this young talent, through that work, evolves beyond anything I can imagine.

January, 2018



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Last and First Idol

by Gengen Kusano

Translated by Andrew Cunningham Edited by Samuel Pinansky This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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Ebook edition 1.0: September 2018